
THE IMPACT OF ADULT SUPPORT STAFF ON PUPILS AND MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF EVIDENCE

*Alison Alborz, Diana Pearson, Peter Farrell and Andy Howes
University of Manchester*

*and The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre)
Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London*

Introduction and background

For the past 15 years there has been rapid growth in the numbers of teaching assistants working in mainstream schools in the UK. Traditionally, the work of teaching assistants has been to support the education of children with special needs, but in the last ten years their contribution towards assisting the education of all pupils has been recognised. In 2003, a National Agreement 'Raising Standards and Tackling Workload' came into force which led to the development of new roles for support staff.

A review on the impact of paid adult support staff on participation and learning was published in 2003¹ which synthesised research undertaken before the National Agreement. This review updates and expands the original synthesis. Most of the research covered in the in-depth part of this review relates to Teaching Assistants in Primary schools, many supporting pupils with additional needs.

Key Findings

Impact on Pupils

Trained and supported teaching assistants can help primary aged children with literacy and language problems to make significant gains in learning.

'Sensitive' teaching assistant support can facilitate pupil engagement in learning and social activities with the class teacher and their peers. This requires teaching assistants to be skilled at encouraging interaction, but also aware of occasions where the pupil needs to undertake self-directed choices and actions.

Teaching assistants can promote social and emotional adjustment, but, from the limited available literature, it appears that they are not very successful in undertaking therapeutic tasks aimed at supporting children with emotional and behavioural problems.

Impact on Schools

The use of teaching assistants allows teachers to engage pupils in more creative and practical activities and to spend more time working with small groups and individuals.

Class-related workload is reduced when working with a teaching assistant, however, the 'management' workload can be increased

¹ Howes A, Farrell P, Kaplan I, Moss S (2003) The impact of paid adult support on the participation and learning of pupils in mainstream schools. In: *Research Evidence in Education Library*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.



Adult presence in the classroom makes teachers feel supported and therefore under less stress. In addition, knowing that pupils are receiving improved levels of attention and support is also reported to enhance job satisfaction for teachers.

Using 'team teaching' styles involving teaching assistants to support small groups within whole class activities seems to promote a more inclusive ethos.

Teaching assistants can act as an intermediary between teachers and parents encouraging parental contacts, participation in the life of the school and, where appropriate, in learning activities. However, care is required to ensure that appropriate contacts with the teacher are maintained.

Methodology

The overall research questions were:

1. What is the impact of adult support staff on the participation and learning of pupils in mainstream schools?
2. What is the impact of support staff on mainstream schools?
3. What are the processes that lead to impacts on pupils and school outcomes?

A systematic review of the literature was undertaken which involved searches in the main educational and social science databases.

Studies were included according to strict quality criteria. A map of literature was produced, and 35 studies (in 39 publications) were identified as relevant to this review.

Few relevant studies described the impact of support staff other than teaching assistants, therefore the in-depth review was focussed on this group of support staff.

Most studies addressed teaching assistant support to pupils with additional needs, comparatively few focussed on general support to pupils in the classroom.

The majority of studies were from the USA and England and Wales. The overwhelming majority examined teaching assistant support in primary schools.

Results

A number of high quality intervention studies considered the impact of teaching assistants on academic achievement and to a lesser extent on participation and engagement. For other themes the evidence relies for the most part on studies that examine the views and experiences of teachers and support staff, most of which were also conducted in a rigorous manner.

Impact on Pupils

Impact on Participation (attendance at school and engagement in learning)

Fourteen studies examined the impact of teaching assistants on pupils with SEN.

Seven of these reported that too much reliance on teaching assistant support can hinder SEN pupil's interaction with peers and teachers, undermine opportunities for self-determination, and may lead to these pupils feeling stigmatised.

Four studies suggest that teaching assistants can have a positive impact on pupils with SEN in maintaining engagement in academic activities, and, where trained, in supporting communication with peers.

Four out of five studies examined the impact of teaching assistants on the participation of all pupils and found positive effects. The presence of teaching assistants was found to help pupils engage in tasks and activities. One study reported mixed findings.

Impact on Academic Progress

A number of studies examined the impact of support staff on academic progress. These included intervention studies that measured impact on attainment before and after an intervention as well as those which measured perceived impact.

Seven out of eight studies suggested that trained and supported teaching assistants, either working on a one to one basis or in a small group, can help primary aged children with literacy and language problems to make significant gains in learning.

Only two studies looked at numeracy. One found no impact and the other had mixed results.

One further study found a positive impact of suitably trained speech and language training assistants on language skills.

In three of the above studies, matched groups of children with identified problems in literacy or language development received help from qualified staff or from teaching assistants (or equivalent). In all studies pupils in intervention groups made significantly more progress than pupils in the comparison groups, who received treatment as usual. There was no difference in the amount of progress made by pupils taught in either of the intervention groups suggesting that, in these studies, the qualified staff and teaching assistants were equally successful in helping the children

Five further studies all reported positive perceptions from teachers, parents / carers, and from the pupils themselves on the impact of teaching assistants on academic development.

Impact on Social and Emotional Development

Six studies looked at this element. There was a general perception that teaching assistants have a positive impact on the social and emotional development of the pupils they support. However, perceptions of pupils with learning disabilities suggested that they recalled developing friendships with their teaching assistant rather than with their peers.

One study also suggested that teaching assistants are not very successful in undertaking therapeutic tasks aimed at supporting children with emotional and behavioral problems.

Processes supporting positive pupil impacts

Teaching assistants are effective if they are trained and supported to deliver specific interventions to individuals or small groups. However the intervention itself should be robust, that is, for example, delivered appropriately and implemented over a sufficient period of time to have an effect.

Support to individuals needs to be finely tuned to their needs to provide sufficient assistance with learning or communication as necessary, but to promote pupil self-determination and social interaction wherever possible. Teaching assistants need to be acutely aware of the individual needs of the pupils they are supporting and to make finely balanced judgements as to the possible impact of their presence in encouraging or discouraging learning and participation.

The type of balanced support suggested above can provide supported pupils with experiences that enhance or improve their self-esteem or confidence, and may impact on behavioural issues

Impact on Schools

Impact on Teaching

Nine studies looked at the impact on teaching. This area includes effects on the curriculum (the range and nature of the topics that the teachers addressed), teaching practices (the approaches that teachers took to organising the classroom and facilitating learning) and assessment.

The impact of support staff on teaching practices varied enormously. In many cases teaching was not substantially affected by the activity of support staff who provided back-up resources. In other cases, they were seen to actively facilitate teaching through their actions.

Overall, the use of teaching assistant support allowed teachers to engage pupils in more creative and practical activities, and use of team working allowed the teacher to spend more time working with small groups or individuals. Conversely, intensive one to one relationships between teaching assistants and pupils can interfere with their engagement with teacher instruction. There was some evidence that this could be detrimental where teaching goals inadvertently become diluted due to an emphasis on task completion at the expense of skill development.

Impact on Teachers

Eight studies looked at the impact on teachers. Three suggested that one impact has been a shift in the teachers role towards more managerial responsibilities.

In addition, two studies suggested that individual support to pupils with disabilities may hinder teachers in assuming a full role in relation to the education of these children.

There is a perception among teachers that support staff have reduced their workload. While much of this has been due to the removal of clerical tasks to administrative staff, classroom based teaching assistants have also contributed towards this impact.

There is some evidence that the presence of motivated support staff increased satisfaction, and reduced stress levels of teachers in mainstream classrooms.

The additional support, perceived to be having a positive impact on pupil's learning experiences and progress was also noted to have an effect in increasing teacher's job satisfaction.

Impact on School Climate

Six studies report on the impact of support on the school climate, but were of variable quality.

There is some evidence that support for pupils with learning disabilities can create a more 'inclusive' environment in the classroom. There was also some evidence that teaching assistants could have a role in promoting parental engagement in that they may be regarded as 'more accessible' than the class teacher but the meaning of this is not clear - it may be that they are less busy or that they are 'socially' more like the parents and more easy to relate to.

Processes supporting positive school impacts

Support appeared more effective when incorporated into a 'team teaching' approach, where the teaching assistant was used as a resource to support individuals or groups within the classroom. Planning and evaluation within 'team' meetings acted to improve facilitation for pupils and enhanced the relationship between teachers and assistants.

Assistance from teaching assistants in providing some of the support to less cooperative individuals or groups of children helped to reduce teacher stress levels.

Using a team approach to supporting small groups of children within the class as a whole, can make the support to children who are underachieving or who have disabilities, part of routine teaching practice with all children, and hence less stigmatising.

Teaching assistants can provide a useful link with parents, through informal or routine contacts, to promote their engagement in school and learning.

Implications for Policy

If well-trained and supported, teaching assistants can effectively support the learning and participation of pupils at the whole group level, in small intervention groups, and on a one-to-one basis where necessary, working with normally developing children, those with learning difficulties and those with the most complex disabilities. This finding has implications for policy on teaching assistant deployment, which needs to promote and require effective programmes for this group to enable them to support pupils with a wide range of abilities appropriately and in the full range of learning interactions.

Policy driving the deployment of the Teaching Assistant workforce has been successful in providing support for teachers on a number of levels and in delivering benefits to pupils. To enhance emerging impacts it is necessary to ensure effective management and support for these staff. A stronger framework for effective training, and establishment of an appropriate career structure would arguably motivate this section of the workforce further.

Within teacher training policy, it is important to emphasise the necessary collaborative working required if Teaching Assistant support is to be employed to its best effect. Teachers need to be appropriately trained in team working approaches during initial or postgraduate training programmes. It will be important to monitor the ongoing effect of the emphasis now given to collaborative working in professional standards for teachers.

Implications for Practice

Findings suggest that, where properly trained and supported, teaching assistants can have a positive impact on pupil progress. It was clear however that progress was more marked when they supported pupils in discrete well defined areas of work on particular aspects of learning. There is therefore a strong case for the deployment of well trained teaching assistants to support pupils (individually or in groups), in collaboration with the class teacher. The evidence reported here suggested that support for literacy may be a particularly productive area.

As in the earlier review on support staff, the findings suggest that support to individual pupils should be combined with supported group work that facilitates all pupils' participation in class activities. The implication here is that teaching assistants should not, normally, work on an exclusively 1:1 basis with pupils. Pupils with particular learning needs may require this type of support at times, but their learning and participation are facilitated where this is kept to a minimum and provided within the context of support to groups.

Similarly, evidence emphasised the importance of allocated time for teachers and teaching assistants to plan programmes of work becoming standard practice.

Where used to support participation in the classroom, teaching assistants and teachers need to work as a team to plan support for individual pupils. However, teaching assistants should be deployed as part of the teacher's wider strategy for achievement of learning objectives across the whole class, and not assigned exclusively to particular individuals.

Within the school environment, teaching assistants are more effective if they are part of the staff team, where their contribution to whole school decision making is valued and where the complementary roles of teachers and teaching assistants are clearly delineated.

References

Studies included in the in-depth synthesis:

Blatchford, P., Martin, C., Moriarty, V., Bassett, P. and Goldstein, H. (2001). *Pupil Adult ratio differences and educational progress over key stage 1*. London: Institute of Education, University of London

Blatchford, P., Basset, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., Russell, A., Webster, R. and Haywood, N. (2006) *The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff in School. Report on findings from a National Questionnaire Survey of Schools, Support Staff and Teachers (Strand 1, Wave 1, 2004)* London: Institute of Education, University of London

Blatchford, P., Basset, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., Russell, A. and Webster, R. (2007) *The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff in School. Report on findings from a National Questionnaire Survey of Schools, Support Staff and Teachers (Strand 1, Wave 2, 2007)* London: Institute of Education, University of London

Blatchford, P.; Bassett, P.; Brown, P.; Martin, C.; Russell, A.; Webster, R.; Babayiçit, S.; Haywood, N. (2008) *Deployment and impact of support staff in schools and the impact of the national agreement: results from Strand 2 Wave 1 - 2005/06* Report London: DCSF

Bowers, T. (1997) Supporting special needs in the mainstream classroom: children's perceptions of the adult role. *Child: Care, Health and Development* 23(3) 217-32

Boyle, J., McCartney, E., Forbes, J and O'Hare, A. (2007) A randomised controlled trial and economic evaluation of direct versus indirect and individual versus group modes of speech and language therapy for children with primary language impairment

Broer, S.M., Doyle, M.B. and Giangreco, M.F. (2005) Perspectives of Students with Intellectual Disabilities about Their Experiences with Paraprofessional Support. *Exceptional Children* 71(4) 415-430

Butt, G. and Lance, A. (2005) Modernising the roles of support staff in primary schools: changing focus, changing function. *Educational Review*, 57(2) 139-149

Causton-Theoharis, J.N. and Malmgren, K. (2005) Increasing peer interactions for students with severe disabilities via paraprofessional training *Exceptional Children* 71(4) 431-444

Cremin, H., Thomas, G. and Vincett, K. (2005) Working with teaching assistants: three models evaluated. *Research Papers in Education* 20(4) 413-32

Frelow, R.D., Charry, J. and Freilich, B. (1974) Academic progress and behavioral changes in low achieving pupils. *Journal of Educational Research*. 67(6), 263-266

French, N.K. and Chopra, R.V. (1999) Parent Perspectives on the Roles of Paraprofessionals. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*. 24(4) 259-272

- Gerber, S. B., Finn, J. D., Achilles, C. M., Boyd-Zaharias, J. (2001) Teacher Aides and Students' Academic Achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 23(2)123 - 143
- Giangreco, F., Broer, S.M. and Edleman, S.W. (2001) Teacher Engagement with Students with Disabilities: Differences Between Paraprofessional Service Delivery Models. *JASH* 26(2) 75-85
- Giangreco, M.F., Edelman, S.W., Luiselli, T.E. and MacFarland, S.Z.C. (1997) Helping or Hovering? Effects of Instructional Assistant Proximity on Students with Disabilities. *Exceptional Children* 64(1) 7-18
- Grek, M.L., Mathes, P.G. and Torgesen, J.K. (2003) similarities and Differences between experience teachers and trained paraprofessionals. An observational analysis. In, S. Vaughn and K.L. Briggs (Eds) *Reading in the Classroom: Systems for the observation of teaching and learning*. Baltimore: Paul H Brooks p 267
- Hemmingsson, H., Borell, L. and Gustavsson, A. (2003) Participation in School: School Assistants Creating Opportunities and Obstacles for Pupils with Disabilities. *OTJR: Occupation, Participation and Health* 23(3) 88-98
- Lacey P; (2001) The Role of Learning Support Assistants in the Inclusive Learning of Pupils with Severe and Profound Learning Difficulties. *Educational Review* 53(2) 157-67
- Loos FM, Williams KP, Bailey JS (1977) A Multi-element Analysis of the Effect of Teacher Aides in an "Open"-style Classroom. *Journal of Applied Behaviour Analysis* 10(3) 437-48
- Malmgren, K. and Causton-Theoharis, J. (2006) Boy in the Bubble: effects of paraprofessional proximity and other pedagogical decisions on the interactions of a student with behavioural disorders. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 20(4)301-312
- Miller, S.D. (2003) Partners-in-Reading: Using Classroom Assistants to Provide Tutorial Assistance to Struggling First-Grade Readers. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk* 8(3)333-349
- Moyles, J. and Suschitzky, W. (1997a) *Jills of All Trades: Classroom assistants in KS1 classes: Summary and Recommendations*. London:University of Leicester / ATL
- Moyles, J. and Suschitzky, W. (1997b) The employment and deployment of classroom support staff: headteachers' perspectives. *Research in Education*. 58 21-34
- Muijs, D. (2003) The effectiveness of the use of learning support assistants in improving the mathematics achievement of low achieving pupils in primary school. *Educational Research* 45(3) 219 - 230
- O'Shaughnessy, T.E.S. and Swanson, H.L. (2000) A Comparison of Two Reading Interventions for Children with Reading Disabilities *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 33(3) 257-277
- Rose, R. (2000) Using Classroom Support in a Primary School: A Single School Case Study. *British Journal of Special Education* 27, 191-96
- Savage, R. and Carless, S. (2008) The impact of early reading interventions delivered by classroom assistants on attainment at the end of Year 2 *British Educational Research Journal* 34(3) 363-385
- Savage, R. and Carless, S. (2005) Learning support assistants can deliver effective reading interventions for "at-risk" children. *Educational Research* 47(1) 45 - 61
- Savage, R., Carless, S. and Stuart, M. (2003) The effects of rime- and phoneme-based teaching delivered by Learning Support Assistants *Journal of Research in Reading* 26(3) 211 - 233
- Tews L. and Lupart, J. (2008) Students with disabilities' perspectives of the role and impact of paraprofessionals in inclusive education settings. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*. 5(1) 39-46
- Vadasy, P., Sanders, E. and Peyton, J. (2006) Paraeducator-supplemented instruction in structural analysis with test reading practice for second and third graders at risk for reading problems. *Remedial and special education* 27(6) 365-378

Vadasy, P.F., Sanders, E.A. and Tudor, S. (2007) Effectiveness of paraeducator-supplemented individual instruction: beyond basic decoding skills. (Report) *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 40(6) 508(18)

Vander Kolk, C.J. (1973) Paraprofessionals as psychotherapeutic agents with moderately disturbed children. *Psychology in the Schools* 10(2) 238-242

Wang, C. and Algozzine, B. (2008) Effects of targeted intervention on early literacy skills of at-risk students. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 22(4) 425-439

Welch, M., Richards, G., Okada, T., Richards, J. and Prescott, S. (1995) A Consultation and Paraprofessional Pull-In System of Service Delivery: A Report on Student Outcomes and Teacher Satisfaction. *Remedial and Special Education, RASE* 16(1)16-28.

Werts, G.M., Harris, S., Tillery, C.Y., Roark, R. (2004) What Parents Tell Us About Paraeducators. *Remedial and special education: RASE* 25(4) 232-239

Werts, M.G., Zigmond, N. and Leeper, D.C. (2001) 'Paraprofessional Proximity and Academic Engagement: Students with Disabilities in Primary Aged Classrooms'. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Development Disabilities* 36(4) 424 - 440

Woolfson, R. and Truswell, E. (2005) Do classroom assistants work? *Educational Research* 47(1) 63-75

Additional Information

For more information about the content of this review please contact Alison Alborz, School of Education, University of Manchester.
Tel: (0161) 275 3342.
Email Alison.alborz@manchester.ac.uk

For more information about the EPPI-Centre's systematic review programmes please contact Mark Newman, EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit (SSRU), Institute of Education, University of London, 18 Woburn Square, London WC1H 0NR. Tel: (020) 7612 6575

This report is available from the EPPI-Centre website as a summary, full report and technical report and can be downloaded or accessed at <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=2438&language=en-US>

This research brief is available from the DCSF website: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/>

The views expressed in this report are the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.