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Should TAs have a pedagogical role?: lessons from practitioner working groups following the DISS project

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Background

Results from the large-scale Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project (presented at a Keynote Symposium at the 2009 BERA Conference) on the impact of teaching assistants (TAs) on pupils' academic progress were clear, but surprising (Blatchford et al, 2009). Pupils who received the most support from TAs made less progress in English, mathematics and science than similar pupils who received less support from TAs (even when controlling for characteristics that can affect progress and the allocation of support, such as prior attainment and SEN). These findings were explained primarily in terms of the decisions made about TA deployment and role preparation, over which TAs have very little control.

The DISS project also found that TAs routinely had direct pedagogical interactions with pupils, and concluded that TAs have become the primary educators of pupils they support Not only did supported pupils - often children with special educational needs - have more contact with TAs, at the expense of interaction with teachers, but TA-pupil interactions were less effective and less educationally valuable compared with teacher-pupil interactions.

The DISS findings have provided the 'wake-up call', but there remain important problems concerning the decision-making behind TA deployment that have not been given sufficient consideration. This paper aims to build on the DISS project using findings from practitioner working groups, set up to discuss the DISS research and offer some ways forward.

In this paper, we will give much-needed attention to the fundamental thinking behind TA deployment decisions, setting out the key deployment options and exploring their underpinning assumptions, implications and potential impact in greater depth than previously managed. We aim to give school leaders and teachers a broad framework for addressing practice now, rather than having to wait for centrally-made policy and guidance. This paper also contributes to research on, and the conceptualisation of, the TA role in mainstream schools.

Research Questions

Given the overtly pedagogical nature of the TA role and its negative impact on pupil learning, significant questions concerning the appropriate role of TAs should be uppermost in the minds of policymakers and practitioners.

If the long-held view that TAs aid academic progress is now in doubt, the prior question must be: what is the appropriate role for TAs? In response, the reality that TAs teach can no longer be ignored, and we must work through the implications of what might stem from maintaining such practice or changing it. The focus of this enquiry is therefore to further explore TA deployment presented in the DISS study.

Methods

This paper draws on evidence from a series of working groups, convened following the publication of the DISS findings. The groups brought together school leaders, teachers, SENCos, trainers and local authority advisors in order to engage in a structured debate and - by drawing on their own experiences - address the implications of the DISS research and identify school-based strategies for effective TA deployment.

Frame

This paper uses the Wider Pedagogical Role (WPR) model, developed through the DISS project, as its analytical framework. The model provided an organisational framework for data from qualitative components of the study. It was also used to explain the findings on TA impact on pupil progress and to frame recommendations for policy and practice.

Components of the WPR model are used to structure data from the working groups and the literature. These components are: deployment; practice (adult-pupil interactions); preparedness (teacher and TA training; and the day-to-day organisation of TAs' work); and conditions of employment (contracts and working arrangements).

Research findings

This paper represents an attempt to get to grips with what follows from specific decisions made about TA deployment. The DISS findings show that school leaders and teachers need to clear about the implications of deploying TAs in pedagogical roles, and the reality behind assumptions made about TA deployment and impact when making these decisions. This paper explores three deployment options.

1. **Primary educator**. The DISS project showed that this is the default TA role. TAs with a pedagogical role can become the primary educators of pupils they support. These pupils are often those whose learning needs necessitate professional input, so it seems unreasonable to expect TAs to produce similar learning outcomes as teachers. Headteachers on the working groups who deployed TAs in a pedagogical role justified this decision by citing positive effects on pupil progress. However, the DISS project found that such evidence is often impressionistic, lacking hard evidence to support it.

2. **Secondary educator.** A number of important issues arise from deploying TAs in a pedagogical role, which are explored in this paper (e.g., potentially negative effects on pupil progress). The secondary educator's role should be complementary - not an alternative - to teacher-led teaching, more prescribed and closely-monitored. Studies examining the effect of TAs who deliver specific curricular interventions show that they tend to have a direct positive impact on pupil progress when trained, well-prepared and given support and guidance about practice (Alborz et al, 2009; Slavin et al, 2009). Working group participants reported tensions between ensuring essential joint preparation/feedback took place and creating paid time for TAs to meet with teachers.

3. **Non-pedagogical role.** If the view is that TAs should not teach directly, this raises questions about what a non-pedagogical role would look like. The DISS project revealed that TAs have an important contribution to make to pupil progress, which is more appropriately expressed in terms of areas that have an indirect effect: limiting persistent, low-level disruption (see also Ofsted, 2005); and supporting pupils to develop soft skills (see also Gray et al, 2007). Causton-Theoharis et al (2007) have used the interesting analogy of TAs as sous-chefs.

The DISS findings make it clear that deploying TAs in pedagogical roles raises issues that challenge existing practice, and which should be thought through in a systematic way. This paper offers a way in which practitioners can address and improve practice by working towards bespoke school-based strategies.