

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Institute of Education
Unit of Assessment: 25
Title of case study: Teaching assistants: why they need to be deployed with care
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

The landmark research project described in this case study has caused national policy-makers, education bodies, inspectors, local authorities and schools to reconsider the once-routine practice of assigning teaching assistants (TAs) to work with lower-attaining pupils and those with special educational needs (SEN). It has led to:

- better use of TAs (and, hence, budgets) in many UK schools
- more carefully considered joint lesson planning by teachers and TAs
- markedly improved learning experiences for many children.

The study's findings are also influencing education policy thinking in other countries.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)
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The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff in Schools project (DISS) was undertaken by researchers at the IOE from 2004-9. Professor Peter Blatchford led a team including research officers Anthony Russell and Rob Webster. Their initial output was a series of reports for government funders.

Context:

The study was conducted during a critical phase in the growth of support staff numbers, following the workforce remodelling reforms of 2003 that were designed to reduce staff workload and raise standards. The number of teaching assistants in England's publicly-funded schools increased threefold from 79,000 (full-time equivalents) in spring 2000 to 232,300 in November 2012¹ -- partly because of the drive to include children with SEN in mainstream education.

Key findings:

The DISS study's principal finding was startling: the more support that pupils received from TAs, the less progress they generally made (see references **R1**, **R2** & **R4**). However, the researchers emphasised that TAs should not be blamed. They concluded that the problem stems from:

- lack of training and professional development of TAs and teachers - three in four teachers had received no training in how to work with TAs
- limited opportunities for planning and feedback between teachers and TAs
- the fact that TAs had become the main educators of many lower-attaining/SEN pupils (**R3** & **R5**).

The researchers found that pupils with SEN were being let down most by these arrangements. The study also revealed that, although most TAs were very dedicated, they tended to be more concerned with the completion of tasks rather than learning. Teachers focused primarily on the latter.

Research methods:

The DISS project was the first longitudinal study to examine the deployment and impact of all categories of support staff across primary, secondary and special schools. It is thought to be the biggest of its kind in the world. The multi-method study covered England and Wales and included all pupils receiving support, not just those with SEN. The DISS team analysed the impact of support staff – especially TAs - on teachers, teaching and learning, behaviour and academic progress. The study involved 8,200 pupils in two cohorts in seven year groups in 153 schools. Researchers observed nearly 700 pupils and more than 100 TAs, and interviewed more than 590 staff and pupils. They also surveyed more than 4,000 teachers, studied 1,670 workload diaries completed by support staff, and analysed more than 100 hours of classroom talk. The researchers compared the impact of different amounts of support from TAs on pupils' progress in English,

¹ DFE (2013) Statistical First Release SFR 15/2013, London: DFE.

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mathematics and science. Sophisticated statistical analysis (multilevel regression models) took account of factors known to affect not only progress but the allocation of TA support, such as prior attainment and free meal entitlement.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1: Blatchford, P., Russell, A. & Webster, R. (2012) *Reassessing the impact of teaching assistants: how research challenges practice and policy*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- R2: Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P., Martin, C., Russell, A. & Webster, R. (2011) The impact of support staff on pupils' 'positive approaches to learning' and their academic progress, *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(3), 443-464.
- R3: Webster, R., Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P., Martin, C. & Russell, A. (2010) Double standards and first principles: Framing teaching assistant support for pupils with special educational needs, *European Journal of SEN*, 25(4), 319-336.
- R4: Blatchford, P., Bassett, P., Brown, P. & Webster R. (2009) The effect of support staff on pupil engagement and individual attention, *British Educational Research Journal*, 35(5), 661-686.
- R5: Russell, A., Webster, R. & Blatchford, P. (2013) *Maximising the impact of teaching assistants: Guidance for school leaders and teachers*, Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Grants:

The main DISS grant, 'Research on the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff', and an extension were awarded to Peter Blatchford. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and the Welsh Assembly Government invested £1.3 million in the project between January 1, 2004 and April 30, 2009.

Indicators of quality:

- IQ1: A 2010 CentreForum report on public-sector spending by Professor Alison Wolf of King's College London described DISS (and a class size project led by Blatchford) as the only "properly constituted studies of [teaching] assistants' impact".
<http://www.centreforum.org/assets/pubs/more-than-we-bargained-for.pdf>
- IQ2: Peter Farrell, Professor of Special Needs and Educational Psychology, University of Manchester, believes DISS is "the most up-to-date, comprehensive and detailed account of the work of teaching assistants in this country" (comment made re. **R1**).
- IQ3: The DISS team has had nine articles published in peer-reviewed journals.
- IQ4: The researchers won funding for two follow-up studies. *Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants (EDTA) project*: A grant of £155,499 from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation enabled them to work with 10 schools (2010-11) to develop and evaluate strategies for the practical improvement of TA preparation, deployment and practice. *Making a Statement (MaSt) project*: A grant from the Nuffield Foundation (£156,839, 2011-12) allowed them to track 40 Year 5 pupils with SEN to find out whether they were receiving the educational support specified in their statements.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Principal beneficiaries:

- Pupils who need additional support - as they achieve more when taught more effectively
- schools, teachers and support staff - because the improved deployment and training resulting from DISS enable them to work more productively
- the public purse - because spending on support staff (£4.1 billion in England's primary and secondary schools in 2008/9) produces better returns when they are carefully prepared and thoughtfully deployed.

Date of impact:

The benefits have been accruing since 2009, and INSET work is growing.

Reach and significance:

DISS has caused policy-makers, education bodies, inspectors, local authorities and schools to reconsider not only the deployment of support staff but provision for lower-attaining/SEN pupils. It has had an impact on thousands of schools in England and Wales and has influenced the thinking of countless SEN co-ordinators and educational psychologists - see impact source (**S1**). The

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description 'ground-breaking' is over-used but this study merits the adjective. DISS has had two important types of impact, which can be categorised² as 'instrumental' (influencing policy and/or practice), and 'conceptual' (enhancing general understanding and informing debate).

Instrumental impact:

Influence on policy: Three months after the DISS report's publication its conclusions were endorsed by the Lamb Inquiry into parental confidence in the SEN system (**S2**). Lamb noted that DISS had shown "a clear relationship between support from teaching assistants and lower attainment and slower rates of progress for pupils with SEN". Two months later the DCSF issued its response to Lamb. It accepted Lamb's recommendation that the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) should produce guidance on the effective deployment of TAs. There is, therefore, thanks to Lamb, an unusually clear 'paper trail' between the DISS report's publication and government response to its findings. The TDA later published three sets of materials for student teachers, including a training toolkit and self-study documents, which refer to the study. Several DfE documents also highlight the DISS findings, including:

- *School Support Staff Topic Paper* (2010), written "to inform the debate about the future role and likely impacts of support staff" – it refers to DISS 60 times (**S3**).
- *Breaking the link between special educational needs and low attainment: everyone's business* (2010), which stresses the importance of targeted deployment of well-trained support staff (**S4**).

DISS has since been cited in coalition government documents, including a 2011 Green Paper on SEN. "Pupils with the most need can become separated from the teacher and the curriculum", the paper cautions (**S5**). The Government Office of the South East created a DISS Innovations Group to look at successful deployment of TAs in schools.

Ofsted thinking: The study has also helped to shape Ofsted guidance for inspectors. A 2011 briefing advises inspectors to challenge the assumption that additional support always improves the progress of pupils with SEN and says they should ask whether TAs always work with the lowest-attaining group (**S6**). More recently, the study's findings have also figured in Ofsted statements on the pupil premium. In September 2012, Sir Michael Wilshaw, the Chief Inspector, said he was concerned that many heads were planning to spend the extra money on TAs when research had shown that they could have a negative effect on pupil learning.

SEN sector: DISS is cited in a number of documents produced for SEN specialists, such as the Autism Education Trust's Professional Competency Framework, which describes the knowledge, understanding and skills that school staff need to work effectively with pupils on the autism spectrum.

Other influence on practitioners: The DISS team has developed an INSET programme to help schools and local authorities deploy support staff more effectively. This training has been delivered to more than 3,000 SEN co-ordinators, heads (**S7**) and other school leaders in Cambridge, Coventry, Berkshire, Dorset, Essex, Hampshire, Surrey, Manchester, Nottinghamshire and several London boroughs. The team has also conducted INSET sessions with educational psychologists, local authority inclusion staff, NQTs and Teach First trainees. The researchers published a handbook for schools, *Maximising the impact of teaching assistants* (Feb. 2013) which had sold more than 2,000 copies by July 31, 2013, and have set up a project website www.schoolsupportstaff.net that offers accessible digests of their findings. This site had received more than 470,000 hits by July, 2013. Many local authorities – including Bristol, Devon, Essex, Northamptonshire and Kensington and Chelsea - have increased the study's influence by issuing staff guidance that refers to its findings. Several LAs, such as Cambridgeshire (**S8**) and Hampshire, have changed the way they process and support statements of SEN because of the research. The IOE team also produced a schools booklet, *Teaching Assistants: A Guide to Good Practice*, published by Oxford University Press, which posted videos about the research on its website.

Conceptual impact:

DISS has raised the general level of understanding of how lower-attaining pupils and those with SEN can be helped to fulfil their potential, and how the country's huge TA workforce can be used more effectively. The researchers have provided many briefings for school leaders and local

² Using Evidence: How Research can Inform Public Services (Nutley, S., Walter, I., Davis, H. 2007)

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authority advisers and have given dozens of keynotes and presentations to seminars and conferences.

Raising public awareness: The press release that the researchers issued to promote the final DISS report triggered massive media coverage. BBC Radio 4 News bulletins reported the findings on September 4, 2009, and several national dailies carried articles on the research. Moreover, the coverage was not confined to the week of the report's publication. Many articles in the mainstream and specialist media (some by the IOE researchers) have referred to its findings since 2009. The publication of the Nuffield-funded MaSt study prompted a second wave of national media coverage in February 2013, including discussions on the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme and Jeremy Vine's Radio 2 show. This has helped to ensure that the IOE team's work has remained in the public consciousness.

Take-up by opinion-formers: Several think tanks have also cited the study. Demos, for example, pointed to DISS's headline finding in a 2010 report, *Ex Curricula*. Its findings were also referred to in the *Cambridge Primary Review* (2009), which concluded: "TAs are no substitute for teachers" (S9). Jean Gross, the former Government Communication Champion for Children, said her thinking had also been influenced by DISS, which she has described as "the most seminal study to address SEN in the past decade" (S10).

Influence on other countries: Policy-makers in France, South Korea, Hong Kong, Australia and Canada have expressed keen interest in the study. DISS is also now well known in Ireland and has been cited extensively by the National Council for Special Education Research, which advises the Irish government and provides information for parents. There are also many references to DISS in a report on special needs and classroom assistants in Ireland and Northern Ireland by the UNESCO-funded Children and Youth Programme.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact³ (indicative maximum of 10 references)

S1: Kate Fallon, general secretary, Association of Educational Psychologists, cited their findings while being questioned by MPs (Children and Families Bill Debate, House of Commons, March 5, 2013, c64).

S2: Lamb, B., Department for Children, Schools and Families (2009) *Lamb Inquiry: special educational needs and parental confidence* <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/9042/>

S3: Whitehorn, T (2010) School support staff topic paper. Nottingham, UK:DfE
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-RTP-10-001.pdf>

S4: *Breaking the link between special educational needs and low attainment: everyone's business* (2010) <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/679/1/00213-2010DOM-EN.pdf>

S5: Support and aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability (2011)
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/CM%208027#downloadableparts>

S6: *Special educational needs and/or disabilities in mainstream schools. A briefing paper for Section 5 inspectors.* London (January 2011)

http://www.kenttrustweb.org.uk/UserFiles/ASK8/File/Inclusion_Achievement/Publications/Ofsted_guidance_SEND_in_mainstream_schools_201210.doc

S7: Headteacher, Oakfield First School, Windsor

S8: Head of Access, Children and Young People's Services, Cambridgeshire County Council.

S9: Cambridge Primary Review: final report (2009)

http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/downloads/revised_2011-02/FINAL_REPORT_BRIEFING_REVISIED_2_11.pdf

S10: Former Government Communication Champion for Children

³ All web links accessed 15/11/13