Teaching Assistants: What the Research Tells Us

Teaching assistants (TAs) are integral to school life. They have become key to enacting policy so it is important that TAs are well prepared, trained for their roles and deployed in ways that impact positively on both pupils and teachers.

The outcomes of a large-scale, five-year piece of research suggest that to maximise the effectiveness of TAs, school leaders may find it useful to reassess how they deploy and prepare them for their work1.

Main research findings:

- TAs had positive effects on teachers’ roles, for example, by providing individual attention to specific pupils or minimising disruptive behaviour.
- TAs spent most of their time working with individuals or groups, mainly those with SEN or lower-attaining children, whereas teachers tended to lead or monitor the whole class.
- TAs were frequently given responsibility for teaching and learning tasks (in particular literacy and numeracy interventions) often taking place outside the classroom.
- Pupils who received the most support from TAs made less progress than similar pupils with less TA support, even after factors like SEN and EAL had been accounted for.
- TAs and teachers used different types of language, for example, TAs were more likely to focus on task completion and often supplied answers, whereas teachers used more open-ended questions to promote thinking and learning, gave more feedback and spent more time explaining concepts.
- Many teachers had no planning or feedback time with TAs, nor had they received training to help them work with or manage TAs.
- TAs reported feeling underprepared and often had to tune into teacher talk to understand the tasks they were expected to support.

Drawing on the findings

Perhaps the strongest message from the research has been how key it is that school leaders take responsibility for making the final decisions relating to TA deployment, organisation and training. A follow-up to the research involving collaborative work with schools shows that where school leaders have acknowledged the importance of these factors, a lot of positive change has been achieved2.

This series of films aims to help you reflect on the implications of the research and looks at some recommendations and important next steps for schools when making decisions about the role of the TA.


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