

# ‘The aim of the game is to support kids’

Dr Rob Webster on working with schools to maximise the impact of teaching assistants on outcomes in children with special educational needs. As told to Annie Brookman-Byrne.

Between 2005 and 2010 we ran a large-scale multi-method longitudinal study at the Institute of Education called the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff study, or DISS for short, which was commissioned and funded by the then Labour government’s Department for Children, Schools and Families. The background to it was a policy drive that had led to the increase in teaching assistants (TAs) helping out in the classroom and outside of the classroom. This was an attempt to find out the impact of that policy in terms of teacher workload and pupil outcomes.

As far as we can tell – and the world has had about 10 years to prove us wrong – this is the largest study ever in the world on this particular topic. What we found was that the kids who got the most support from TAs did less well in core subjects of English, maths and science, compared to kids who didn’t have any support at all or only a fractional amount of support.

The kids with Special Education Needs (SEN) are most affected, because they’re the ones that have the most support. It’s not because they have SEN that they don’t make as much progress as everybody else, nor is it because of other characteristics like prior attainment or deprivation, and it turns out it’s nothing to do with the TAs either – it’s all to do with unintentionally ineffective decision making around deployment. School leaders and teachers just don’t really know how to run the lesson with the TA in there – they just direct them to sit with the kids who struggle and hope for the best. There’s no time for the teachers and TAs to meet, so the TAs, who don’t have any particular training, are in quite a reactive position.

Years ago, quite often local authorities would run an induction programme for new TAs. But we don’t see those anymore, and there’s nothing at the national level. If a school wants to do an induction programme for new TAs then it’s almost entirely up to them, and of course it will vary.

The other point was that TAs tend to focus on task completion and task correction, and the cumulative

effect of this high support for long periods of time is that kids become dependent on it. They get used to the TA telling them the answers. So it’s this model of inclusion that we have drifted towards over the last 20 years, where it’s a common sense idea that TAs provide individualised support for kids who need it most. It’s well intentioned, and you can see the logic to it, but once you really put it under the microscope it raises serious questions about whether that is in the best interests of the kids who are on the receiving end.

The other side to it is that there were positive outcomes for the teachers in terms of their workload and job satisfaction. One of the drivers of this whole policy area was to try and stem the flow of teachers leaving the profession. Whether or not it achieved that, we don’t really know for sure, but we do know that it helped teachers with their workload problems. So on the one hand, great policy for teachers, but on the other hand, unintended consequences for children.

## Applying the research in schools

We knew where the fault lines were. We knew where schools were not getting it right. This is not a blame game here; it is just to say that we can see the problem for what it is. The work I’ve done subsequently, through Maximising the Impact of TAs (MITA) has been underpinned by the evidence and driven by a practical application of the research. How does a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) or headteacher make sure they’re getting the best value and impact from TAs? We’ve been on this mission now for about nine years. We set up MITA about six years ago, and what we’ve been doing is formalising that as a process and trying to engage with schools to put it into practice.

Another interesting parallel to this is the interest in using evidence in schools, and what the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has done to bring that to the awareness of school leaders. At the EEF

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*Dr Rob Webster, Centre for Inclusive Education, UCL Institute of Education*

*Find Rob's article on the pivotal role of TAs in the coronavirus catch-up strategy at <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/teaching-assistants-are-pivotal-successful-catch-strategy>*

the phone was ringing off the hook about TAs, the evidence was completely at odds with what schools thought and what they experienced. They wanted to know how it could be that TAs were having a less than positive impact on learning, and what they could do about it. And so the EEF got in touch with us and we put this guidance together for schools. I now refer to it as our calling card.

This guidance has been in the system for about five years now, and something like 80 per cent of headteachers are aware that this guidance exists and/

or have used it. It's very practical and it stems directly from our research.

The use of TAs causes this sort of separation between the supported pupil, and the teacher, the classroom and their peers – so the more support they get from the TA, the less they will have from the teacher. That's a really important plank of the explanation for our results in the DISS project. Then the second main strut is the interaction – the TAs doing the work for the kids and not creating the space for independence. And then the third bit is if teachers

and TAs are not given the opportunity to meet together to plan, then the TAs are in this reactive position. They don't quite know what they're doing and the teachers are not planning with the TAs in mind.

So there's a three pronged attack if you like, and there were some very clear recommendations in the guidance. The guidance is actually very intuitive for school leaders because on reflection it's not a huge surprise when you carefully unpack the findings. The main issue is that it's really hard to do. And the point that we're at now is that we've completed a randomised controlled trial (RCT) that was funded by the EEF and independently evaluated to test these methods.

We provided in school support and we trained all the TAs and the teachers. We chuck a whole barrelful of resources at them and say, 'this is what you need to do, and we will help you as best we can'. My main question is, can you move schools away from those practices we know are ineffective and harmful? We don't just want to neutralise the problem, we want to try to get some benefits. We completed this trial, and the logic is to see whether or not any of this makes an impact on pupil outcomes via changing the processes.

The EEF like to measure things in terms of academic outcomes, which is fine. But we see the direct impact of MITA in terms of improving pupil independence. That's the bit we're aiming for, that's the bit we're trying to change. The hope is that that will then knock on into pupil impact. In a nutshell, the aim of the game with MITA is to get TAs working with kids to support their independence, helping them to scaffold their own learning, and be in charge of the learning process. And that, it turns out, is not something you can do just by training TAs. You have to do a heck of a lot of work around it with school leaders to get the right conditions for that to happen.

### **Beyond 'what works'**

There has been a lot of attention on what works, rightly so. But one of the things that happens when the focus is on what works, is the pressure of resources, time and accountability forces schools to look for things that show impact quickly. It narrows the field of stuff that they would perhaps want to do – something that's cheap, that's going to show an effect within six weeks. And what works is important, but what I have learned through MITA is that the how is equally, if not more, important.

The way this revealed itself is that in our guidance we tried to answer the question 'what works?' but what started to emerge from school leaders was the question 'how do we do it?' And that started another line of inquiry within our RCT. We have 128 schools in treatment and a business as usual condition. Of the 60 or so schools who are in the treatment condition, they have all received the same thing. The same materials, the same training. Yet we can tell there is variability in terms of how far schools have gone for it.

You've got schools who have really just got it,

## A growing field of research around TAs

**When I did my undergraduate degree, I got myself a part-time job in a secondary school as a TA. Then during my Master's course in social policy I was TAing in a primary school, so I got a feel for the job. I was uncertain about what focus to take for the thesis, and I just thought – well, write about what you know. It still feels like research on TAs is maturing, but back then it was really quite scant, and I was struck by the fact that this is not something that has been looked at.**

And then it was just a case of being in the right place at the right time. I got into the research side of things through my Master's, and not long after that, a research post on the DISS project came up. And I've been clinging on by my fingernails ever since! The DISS project, from a research point of view, has been the gift that keeps on giving. There's been so much in it and so much coming out of it, and so much has been developed off it. It's kept me interested and kept me going.

absolutely bought into it and are giving it 100 per cent. In their own observations, outside of the formal evaluation, they are saying it's having an impact. And you've got other schools who just haven't really got out of the starting gate with it, and the question for me is, why is that? That cannot solely be a function of MITA, that has to be something else. So for me, what works is important but let's not lose sight of how it works.

'What works' is driving the research agenda a lot, that's where the money is. You've got to come up with something that shows you have impact. Yet descriptive research, which describes the classroom, the naturalistic picture, tells us how these pictures change over time and differ between settings. If we focus too much on what works, we might take our eye off the ball of the context in which things do or don't work. There's a very strong case that the not so exciting research that describes the world is also really important, and we should continue to make space for that.

### **A dispiriting picture for SEN**

The reports from the National Audit Office and the Education Committee that came out in 2019 are pretty damning assessments of the current situation and the impact of SEN reforms in 2014. Those reports really paint quite a dispiriting picture for SEN, although there is other evidence from parent/carers forums that does suggest there are families for whom the reforms are now working. We are not learning enough about where it does seem to have been successful.

Whatever the response is, it's got to involve more money, I can't see any other way around it. But it's not just about the money, it's how you spend it, it's to do with ethos and values as well. You cannot buy yourself into inclusiveness. Unless we get a cultural shift you can just throw money at this until the cows come home. The money is important but trying to tell a better story about inclusion, and why that matters and why schools should support it, is essential too.



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