

that conflicted with the aims of the study, besides highlighting features of good practice that we were aware was already taking place.

We decided to pilot the questionnaires in one Community College before auditing the other Secondary and Special Schools. This pilot provided us with an initial response to the effectiveness of the questionnaires.

The process of visiting and interviewing members of the workforce within the schools took place during the period of one term. The following term was directed to analysing the responses and compiling a report before the end of the academic year 2003/4.

### Conclusions

In the light of the findings of the audits there appears to be several implications for the effective deployment of TAs. We identified these as:

- the need for planned time for teaching assistants and teachers to meet together and collaborate;
- support and guidance for teaching assistants on appropriate strategies to be used with specific students; and
- training for teachers on how to deploy and manage the work of teaching assistants in supporting teaching and learning; and

The implications for professional development for teaching assistants are:

- a clear performance management;
- identification of opportunities for continuing professional development; and
- provision of pathways for career development guidance.

### Further Reading

The Employment and Deployment of Teaching assistants – project summary April 2004 Ref: TAD NFER research project

Teaching assistants in Schools: the current state of play – NFER research outcome August 2002

A survey of working life in teachers – NFER research outcome – January 2003  
Available from the National Foundation for Educational Research web site [www.nfer.ac.uk](http://www.nfer.ac.uk)

DfES (2002) *Working with Teaching assistants A good practice guide*. London: DfES (DfES 0148/2000)

Ofsted (2002) *Teaching assistants in Primary Schools. An evaluation of the quality and input of their work*.

Building the School Team our plans for support staff training and development 2005-06 Teacher Training Agency

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National Teacher Research Panel  
engaging teacher expertise

# The active engagement of teaching assistants in teaching and learning

  
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This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2006, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research. All conference materials are available at [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp)



## Aims of the project

The aim of this research was to cast light on the nature of the relationship between teachers and teaching assistants.

We wanted to find out:

- how schools were deploying teaching assistants;
- what responsibilities teachers were giving to teaching assistants and what expectations they had of them; and
- what contributions teaching assistants were making to enable teachers to carry out their tasks more effectively.

## Dimensions of the study

In 2003 two Advanced Skills Teachers (ASTs) working within the National Agreement conducted an audit of twenty primary schools within Plymouth LEA to investigate the professional practice of teachers working with teaching assistants (TAs) within Plymouth LEA. This audit was presented at a national conference for ASTs in November 2003.

Following the success of this primary audit it was decided to conduct a similar audit for secondary and special schools in January 2004. Seven schools linked to secondary and special education were audited in the Spring term 2004 to investigate the professional practices of teachers and the deployment of support staff. This summary will focus on the findings of the audit that relate to the role of teaching assistants.

## Summary of main findings

- Teaching assistants were deployed in a variety of ways in schools from providing support on a one-to-one basis, to developing resources and assisting teachers in student evaluation.
- All schools made efforts to involve teaching assistants in planning activities.
- Teaching assistants played a central role in providing detailed feedback to teachers on student progress and helping them to develop individual education plans.
- Teaching assistants provided students with detailed feedback on their own progress.
- Teaching assistants were a valuable partner for teachers in developing and implementing behavioural strategies.

## Background and context

This research was prompted by the teachers' concern to consider implications from the National Agreement January 2003, signed by representatives of DfES, local authority employers and workforce unions.

The teachers recognised that within Plymouth LEA good practice existed in schools where teachers and teaching assistants were forming effective working partnerships and were working to raise the profile of the teaching assistant. Consequently Primary and Secondary audits were commissioned to look particularly at:

- the role and deployment of support staff;
- the existence of good working practice, particularly between teachers and teaching assistants; and
- the contribution that support staff made to supporting and developing standards of teaching and learning.

The Primary audit consisted of a range of twenty schools randomly selected across all academic councils and consisting of Nursery, Infant, Junior, Primary and a Special School.

The Secondary audit consisted of seven schools randomly chosen for their diversity and provision of Secondary education. These included two community colleges, a grammar school, a religious denomination comprehensive, a comprehensive, a special school and a hospital school. Within this sample were single and mixed gender schools, as well as a representation of different social mix.

## The Findings

### Deployment of teaching assistants

Teaching assistants were deployed in a variety of ways, including:

- being class based and/or curriculum specific;
- being assigned to individual children with specific special needs including behaviour;
- being assigned to small groups - low ability, target groups; and
- developing curriculum resources and/or working in school libraries.

### The Partnership between teachers and teaching assistants

There was evidence in all the schools of the partnership between teachers and teaching assistants fostering mutual support and confidence. This was especially the case when teaching assistants were class-based and in a long term situation. There were also many examples of positive working relationships, consisting of good teamwork, respect and gratitude for the TAs work and support. Essential elements to building a good relationship appeared to be:

- clear expectations from the teacher which enabled a sense of mutual responsibility to be fostered; and
- the teacher's desire to be proactive in building the working relationship.

One teacher's proactive attitude was expressed in the following terms:

*"My relationship with my teaching assistant has developed into one of mutual confidence and respect. This helps me to focus on matching teaching styles to individual student needs. I recognise the value of support that my TA provides to students and encourage her to take part in the lessons."*

### Teaching assistants' involvement in planning and delivering lessons

All schools involved teaching assistants in planning activities in a variety of ways, such as:

- providing TAs with access to the weekly planning for each class they were working in, as well as to meetings to developing course overviews, schemes of work and long term planning. Many TAs attending these meetings on a voluntary basis;
- providing TAs with information about materials needed to adapt work for students with special needs, such as visually impaired students, students' with ADHD or students who required physical support; and
- setting aside assembly time to allow teachers to share planning with TAs.

The study found that time was regarded as being a constraint on more thorough joint planning. Most primary schools, for example, stated that there was a need for non-contact time to be built into the school week, for teachers and TAs to discuss planning and classroom issues.

### The involvement of TAs in feedback, assessment and record keeping

All schools indicated that TAs provided teachers with valuable insights into students and their learning activities, as well as giving students feedback directly. This often took place as:

- verbal feedback at the beginning or at the end of the lesson;
- verbal feedback at break or lunch time;
- feedback forms completed by the TA at the end of lessons; and
- TAs' annotation of students' work;

Feedback would typically link to whether and how the learning objective was achieved by the student, also what the next step in the learning process for the students should be. Often there would be a short evaluation from the TA on the effectiveness of the teaching and learning, and how this may be modified, improved or supported for future use.

In one instance a TA gave feedback directly, using a simple grading system relating to the degree of support a student had needed from the TA. The TA and student also completed a simple statement of reflection on the student's learning progress, involvement, interest and motivation in the activity. The TA used this opportunity to provide positive encouragement and to praise achievement.

All schools stated that teaching assistants contributed to record keeping and collecting evidence of students' progress for formal assessment. This could consist of the TA:

- taking small groups on a permanent or one-to-one basis;
- keeping a file of work covered by SEN students for future reference;
- feeding back to the teacher and special educational needs co-ordinator (SEN) to inform the teacher's own assessment of an individual student; and
- contributing to writing and reviewing student Individual Education Plans (IEP).

However, the TAs in the study did not make decisions relating to curriculum requirements or levelling procedures for the students.

## Behavioural Strategies

Teachers often worked closely with TAs to develop behavioural strategies. This would in most cases involve devising approaches that encouraged positive behaviour and agreeing on sanctions as required by the school's behavioural policy. The TA would also support students with specific behavioural needs who spent time out of the classroom, but consulted closely with the teacher on how this time should be managed.

The study also found that TAs often provided insight from experience in other lessons that teachers could act upon, and so help to establish and maintain continuity.

## Research methods and strategies

Two questionnaires were prepared and taken to the primary schools by two interviewers. These questionnaires were used to interview the headteacher, class teachers and teaching assistants in each school.

Four questionnaires were prepared and taken to the secondary schools by four interviewers. In some instances these questionnaires had been sent to schools prior to the visit for the questions to be considered and answered in consultation with other colleagues. As with the primary school, a senior manager (headteacher / principal / business manager), teachers and teaching assistants were interviewed. The audits also involved interviews with support staff other than teaching assistants, but those findings do not form a part of this summary.

As this research involved a number of schools and members of the school workforce it was decided to use questionnaires and interviews as the main method of collecting the data. These questionnaires were easy to administer and provided standardised answers that formed the basis of the statistical analysis for the final report. Although we included pre-coded answers in the questionnaires, by conducting interviews we felt that we offered interviewees the opportunity to relate and elaborate these questions directly to their own experience. This provided us with both quantitative and qualitative data research. It was important to us that this audit did provide a wide range of responses relevant to the roles of support staff employed in Secondary and Special schools. We wanted to find out what the constraints and issues existed