

The DISS project: background, aims and methodology

DISS project briefing note 1

Peter Blatchford, Paul Bassett, Penelope Brown, Clare Martin, Anthony Russell & Rob Webster



Leading education
and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

www.schoolsupportstaff.net

This briefing note summarises the background to the **Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project** and the contexts in which the study was conducted. We outline the aims of the study and present the research design that makes the DISS project distinctive. In particular, we unpack the Main Pupil Support Survey, which shows how for the first time, we have been able to produce a large scale, systematic analysis of the impact of teaching assistants (TAs) on teachers and pupils.

The DISS project research team

Peter Blatchford, Paul Bassett, Penelope Brown, Clare Martin, Anthony Russell and Rob Webster (Institute of Education, London). With Selma Babayigit, Naomi Haywood, Maria Koutsoubou (IoE), and Christine Rubie-Davies (University of Auckland, New Zealand)

Significance of the DISS project

- Largest study of TAs and other support staff conducted in the UK
- Tracked changes over 2003-08 following workforce reforms in England and Wales
- Covered all categories of support staff
- Analysis of effects of TAs on pupil outcomes
- Study has important implications for teaching, school leadership and education of pupils with special educational needs (SEN)
- Developed the 'Wider Pedagogical Role' model
- Contributes to research on growing use of paraprofessionals

Background to the DISS project

The rise in support staff

In 2010, almost half of the school workforce (45%) were support staff. A number of developments have contributed to the growth in the range and number of support staff in schools since 1997. These include the delegation of funding for SEN, the introduction of the national literacy and numeracy strategies, and in 2003, the introduction of *'The National Agreement: raising standards and tackling workload'*, which set out to raise pupil standards and tackle teacher workload via new and expanded support roles.

Previous research on support staff

Much of the existing research on support staff – and in particular, those in classroom-based roles (e.g. TAs) – has tended to focus on the ambiguity of support roles in relation to teachers and teaching and/or the role of TAs in relation to the inclusion and support of pupils with SEN.

There exists in schools a generally positive view about TAs, but there are significant gaps in knowledge regarding their preparation and training, deployment and practice (e.g. their interactions with pupils). Government policy that has led to the sustained and significant increase in TA numbers, and the creation of higher-level TAs, has proceeded on the assumption that they help to raise standards for *all* pupils, not just those they support.

Although there has been some research into the impact of TAs on teachers (for example, on teacher workload), there has been little systematic research on their impact on pupil outcomes. Such evidence, as it exists, tends to be derived from small scale intervention studies, involving specific subjects and/or year groups (see Alborz et al, 2009). There is even less research over sustained periods (e.g. a school year) and under everyday classroom conditions. The DISS study was, therefore, designed to help fill these gaps.

Aims of the DISS project

1. To provide an accurate, systematic and representative description of the types of support staff and their characteristics and deployment in schools, and how these changed over time
2. To analyse the impact of support staff on teachers, teaching and pupil learning, behaviour and academic progress

DISS methodology: a distinctive research design

- Conducted on larger scale than previously attempted
- Naturalistic longitudinal design; not targeted interventions
- Allowed analysis of differences over time, by school type and by support staff category
- Multi-method approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses
- Analysis of deployment and practice based on timelogs, systematic and structured observations, and transcripts of talk
- Statistical modelling to test effects of TAs on pupils' attitudes to learning, academic progress and behaviour
- Analysis of case study data, integrating interviews and observations. Coded to allow key dimensions/issues to emerge
- First study to record and analyse TA-to-pupil interactions
- **Strand 1:** three biennial large scale, national questionnaire surveys of schools, teachers and support staff
- **Strand 2:** detailed analysis of the deployment and impact of support staff; and qualitative analysis of processes in schools connected to the deployment and impact of support staff

DISS data collection methods and responses

Surveys	Responses from 6,079 schools, 4,091 teachers and 7,667 support staff
Timelogs	1,670 responses from individual support staff
Structured observations	27 TAs across 18 schools. 1,502 observations of teachers, TAs and pupils in 140 lessons
Systematic observations	686 pupils across 49 schools. 34,400+ observations of TA-to-pupil interactions
Case studies	65 schools. 591 interviews with school leaders, teachers, support staff and pupils
Adult-to-pupil interaction	32 lesson-length transcripts of teacher-to-pupil and TA-to-pupil talk (recorded simultaneously)
Main pupil support survey	8,200 pupils, in 7 year groups, across 153 schools. English, maths and science scores

Measures of TA impact on pupils explained

- Main Pupil Support Survey analysed effects of TA support over a school year on pupils' Positive Approaches to Learning (PAL) (e.g. motivation, confidence) and academic progress
- Two waves of survey covering Years 1, 3, 7 and 10 (Wave 1), and Years 2, 6 and 9 (Wave 2)
- **PAL outcomes:** teacher ratings on whether pupils' PAL had improved, remained unchanged or decreased
- **Academic progress outcomes:** academic attainment at start and end of school year, based on Key Stage assessments, National Curriculum levels from optional tests, teacher assessments and predicted GCSE grades (Year 10 pupils only)
- **PAL and academic progress predictors:** teacher estimates of amount of TA support received, as percentage of time support was provided (0%; 1-10%; 11-25%; 26-50%; 51-75%; 75%+)
- Analyses used multi-level regression, and controlled for pupils' SEN status, prior attainment, free school meals eligibility, English as additional language, deprivation, gender and ethnicity

Reference: Alborz, A., Pearson, D., Farrell, P. & Howes, A. (2009) *The impact of adult support staff on pupils and mainstream schools*, DCSF/IOE