

Working with adults

A systematic literature review on the perceptions of ways in which teaching assistants work to support pupils' social and academic engagement in secondary classrooms (1988-2005)

What do we want to know?

What are stakeholders' perceptions of the role of teaching assistants in secondary schools?

Who wants to know and why?

There is a widely held belief that teaching assistants (TAs) lighten teachers' workloads, support learning and increase the level of pupil engagement, thus securing inclusion for pupils with special needs and raising standards. The National Agreement on workforce reform sets out plans to free teachers to focus on teaching and learning, and to develop the roles of TAs in schools; new teachers need to be prepared for working as part of a team. This requires information about the current roles of teaching assistants, and where they are most effective. The report will be of interest to policy-makers, initial teacher trainers, school managers, teachers and teaching assistants.

What did we find?

- **Teaching assistant (TA)** responses tended to focus on their direct contributions to learners (academic and socio-academic). They believed that they made significant contributions to pupil engagement and saw themselves as key figures in the education of children. There was an awareness that TAs could interfere with the integration of pupils, but they claimed to be promoting independence.
- **Teacher** perceptions were generally positive, welcoming the support and flexibility that the presence of an additional adult gave them. There were indications that TAs were a source of motivation for teachers and that they were critical in bringing about inclusive practices.
- **Headteachers** valued the contributions of TAs, particularly to inclusion. They recognised, however, that TAs could create a culture of dependence.
- **Pupil** perceptions centred around the teaching assistant being someone to turn to, to listen to them and to help the teacher. At the secondary level, TAs were seen as co-learners; models of how to learn; and less the authority figure than the teacher. However, some pupils could see interventions by TAs as intrusive and

unhelpful.

- **Parents** were often unsure about the nature of TA contributions, but felt that TAs were often critical to the education of their children and in some cases to their inclusion.
- Studies also confirmed that the presence of additional adults in the classroom is not perceived to be a guarantee of social and academic engagement. While most perceptions appear to be positive, the negative perception of pupils over-protected by TAs was mentioned in a number of our included studies. Indeed, some older pupils expressed annoyance at the intrusiveness of some TAs.

What are the implications?

- TAs are perceived to be much more than auxiliary staff who assist teachers with routine tasks. In their direct interactions with pupils, they are perceived to be making significant pedagogic decisions. However, one worrying incidental finding was the lack of time for TAs and teachers to plan and evaluate their work.
- The results suggest that TAs support learning under the direction of the teacher but are semi-autonomous and make pedagogical decisions in their interactions with pupils. Further training is needed for TAs and teachers to avoid the creation of dependence or a sense of intrusiveness.
- The results also suggest that TAs play a role in inclusion, which has implications for their training (e.g. what to include, opportunities for supervision, observation, feedback and guidance). We need to know more about the added value of their presence and what happens when their support is not available.

How did we get these results?

A systematic review identified 168 studies, of which 17 were selected for in-depth review.

Where to find further information

<http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=456>

Where to find further information

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The results of this systematic review are available in three formats:

SUMMARY

Explains the purpose of the review and the main messages from the research evidence

TECHNICAL REPORT

Includes the background, main findings, and full technical details of the review

DATABASES

Access to codings describing each research study included in the review

These can be downloaded or accessed at <http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/reel/>

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