

Working with adults

A systematic literature review on the perceptions of ways in which support staff work to support pupils' social and academic engagement in primary classrooms (1988-2003)

Why is the issue important?

In recent years, UK classrooms have seen a large increase in the number of teaching assistants (TAs). There is a widely held belief that support staff play a significant role in lightening teachers' workloads and in supporting learning, but little is known of what affected stakeholders (teachers, pupils, heads, parents) believe about support staff.

What did we find?

Stakeholders reported the following contributions:

- **Direct academic and socio-academic contributions to pupils:** TAs supported pupils directly in a number of ways (e.g. mediating teacher inputs and peer interactions and interpreting instructions).
- **Contributions to inclusion:** TAs supported the inclusion of pupils by maximising the opportunities for pupils to participate constructively in the social and academic experience of schooling.
- **Stakeholder relations:** TAs acted as a link between different stakeholders.
- **Contributions to teachers/curriculum:** TAs performed routine tasks that enabled teachers to focus on securing academic engagement.

Teaching assistants, teachers and headteachers were given a voice in a large number of studies; parent and pupil perspectives were less prominent. Teaching assistants focused on direct academic and socio-academic contributions to learners. Teachers welcomed the flexibility of an additional adult's presence, while headteachers identified contributions to inclusion, academic engagement and support for teachers. Pupils saw support staff members as someone for them to turn to and someone who helped the teacher. Parents welcomed

the presence of additional adults, but were not always clear about what they did.

How did we get these results?

We applied inclusion criteria to the titles and abstracts of more than 10,000 studies, reducing the number to 469, which we screened. We mapped 145 studies that reported stakeholders' perceptions of support staff contributions to social and academic engagement. These were keyworded and then the focus was narrowed to primary schools in the UK/EU. Seventeen studies were analysed in depth.

What are the implications?

The studies suggest that TAs have an increasingly important pedagogic role, under the formal guidance of teachers and senior managers in schools. In their direct interactions with pupils, they make significant pedagogic contributions and decisions. There are implications for the way we prepare teachers to work in classroom teams and manage the contributions of other adults, to incorporate TA contributions and create a constructive working partnership. Teachers should now plan for inclusion of the assistant who may be interpreting or mediating teacher input to individuals or small groups of pupils (possibly with limited training). Educational planners and senior managers need to understand the contribution of classroom-based support staff in the four categories identified above. Increasing use of support staff might lead to dependency if assistants are not skilled in knowing when to intervene, and when to withdraw or not offer support.

More research is needed on the nature of TAs' interactions with pupils, how TAs decide when to support and when not to intervene, and how pupils and parents view the contributions of TAs.



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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