

Case study on the impact of IOE research

The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project

July 2010

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"There is definitely a DISS snowball rolling downhill, gathering momentum and growing – and you started it rolling."

Extract from headteacher's email to DISS project researcher.

About the study

The study's main aims were:

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

The project is believed to be the biggest of its kind anywhere in the world and was the first to examine the deployment and impact of all categories of support staff across all school sectors (primary, secondary and special). It covered England and Wales and included all pupils who received support, not just those with special educational needs. The study was conducted during a critical phase in the growth and use of support staff, following the implementation of the workforce remodelling reforms of 2003, which were designed to reduce staff workload and raise standards. In 2009, support staff made up more than half of the school workforce.

Researchers analysed nearly 20,000

responses to questionnaire surveys (aimed at schools, support staff and teachers) as well as 1,670 workload diaries completed by support staff. The research team carried out detailed classroom observations in 114 schools and interviews with 591 staff and pupils.

The DISS study was also the first large-scale research project to analyse the interactions between teaching assistants (TAs) and pupils, and more than 100 hours of talk was recorded. No fewer than 8,200 pupils across seven year groups in 153 schools were involved in a survey to test the impact of TAs on children's learning and behaviour.

Findings

The researchers' key finding was both remarkable and disturbing: in general, the more support pupils received from teaching assistants, the less progress they made.

Exhaustive analysis of the data showed that there was a consistent negative relationship between the amount of support given and the progress children made in English and mathematics in 2005/6 and 2007/8, even after controlling for pupil characteristics such as prior attainment and SEN status. The same could be said of science in 2007/8 (in 2005/6 the pattern had been unclear).

In English, the difference in progress

Who conducted the study?

Peter Blatchford, Paul Bassett, Penelope Brown, Clare Martin, Anthony Russell and Rob Webster, Department of Psychology and Human Development, Institute of Education

Who provided the funding?

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (England) and the Welsh Assembly Government invested £1.3 million in the project.

Duration

2003-08

between the least supported pupils and those receiving most help (those spending more than half their lesson time with a TA or another member of the support staff) was the equivalent of two national curriculum sublevels in 2007/8 and one-and-a-half in 2005/6. (There are three sublevels for each full national curriculum level. Children are expected to move up roughly one level every two years.)

In maths and science, the difference in progress between the least and most supported pupils equated to one sublevel.

The researchers also found that:

- TAs tended to be more concerned with the completion of tasks rather than learning and understanding. Teachers were more focused on the latter.
- Support staff generally reduced teachers' workload and stress levels and increased their job satisfaction. Teachers felt that they helped to raise the quality of teaching, and observations showed that they increased the amount of individual attention a child received and improved classroom control.
- In 2005/6 there was little or no association between the amount of TA involvement and primary and secondary pupils' PAL rating (positive approach to learning). However, the second survey (in 2007/8) showed that Year 9 secondary pupils appeared to benefit from TAs' involvement. The more support they received, the better their relationships with peers became. They also became less distractible, and better at following instructions. Paradoxically, help from TAs also made them more independent.
- While the TAs who were surveyed were extremely dedicated – many were working extra hours without pay – their routine deployment to pupils who needed most help seemed to be the heart of the problem. "Pupils with the most need

can become separated from the teacher and the curriculum. This is not, however, the fault of TAs," the DISS team concluded.

How the researchers have promoted their findings

Discussions with policy-makers

Following the publication of their final report in August 2009, the DISS team have had many discussions with international, national and regional bodies that are keen to improve:

- a) the impact of classroom support staff through effective deployment, *and*
- b) outcomes for pupils – particularly those with SEN.

Members of the DISS team have also been co-opted on to the Effective Deployment of Support Staff Expert Group established by the Training and Development Agency for Schools.

Project website

The researchers have set up a project website www.schoolsupportstaff.net that offers accessible digests of their findings and research methods, as well as other useful links and a news blog about the DISS research (for example, updates on how the findings are having an impact).

Press release

The researchers produced a press release¹ on their report that resulted in a huge amount of media coverage. BBC Radio 4 News bulletins reported the findings and Peter Blatchford, the project leader, was interviewed by Radio 5 Live and BBC London. Several national dailies carried articles on the research, as did The Times Educational Supplement, which devoted its front-page lead and a full-page leader article to the study. The Economist also published an article on the research.

Presentations at research conferences

This media coverage coincided with the research team's successful keynote



symposium at the 2009 conference of the British Educational Research Association². The DISS team have since had three papers presented at the 2010 conference of the American Educational Research Association. They are also addressing the International Reading Recovery Institute in July 2010 (this event is hosted by the IOE).

Articles and academic papers

The team have written articles for a number of peer-reviewed journals and practitioner publications³. This is ensuring that the research messages are heard by teachers as well as academics and policy-makers.

Training

Members of the DISS team have developed an in-service education and training programme to help schools and local authorities deploy classroom support staff more effectively⁴.

Impact of the study

The DISS findings have important implications for, and are feeding into, national debates and policy-thinking in

several areas:

- The deployment and role of classroom support staff
- Provision for SEN pupils
- Pay and conditions of employment for all support staff.

Lamb Inquiry and government response

In December 2009 – only three months after the DISS team published their final report – their findings were endorsed by the government–commissioned Lamb Inquiry which had been asked to look at how parental confidence in the SEN system could be improved⁵.

The Inquiry report noted that the DISS project had found that using support staff as teacher-substitutes had a negative impact on children's progress. "There is a clear relationship between support from teaching assistants and lower attainment and slower rates of progress for pupils with SEN," the Inquiry report pointed out.

Two months after the Lamb report was published the DCSF issued its official response⁶. It reiterated that TAs have a

DISS findings have implications for

Role of classroom support
Provision for SEN pupils
Support staff pay and conditions

valuable role to play in the education of children with SEN. However, it acknowledged: “For teaching assistants to have most impact they need to be trained, supported, deployed and managed effectively.”

The DCSF said that it would:

- accept the Lamb Inquiry recommendation that guidance on the effective deployment of teaching assistants should be produced by the Training and Development Agency for Schools. This guidance would be disseminated by September 2010.
- review the Qualified Teaching Status Standards to ensure that newly qualified teachers understand how best to deploy teaching assistants to support all pupils.

There is therefore, thanks to the Lamb Inquiry, an unusually clear ‘paper trail’ between the publication of the DISS report and government action in response to its findings. The speed of the response – just under six months – is also exceptional for a research study.

DCSF and Ofsted

The DISS project’s findings appear to have resonated with senior officials and policymakers. Two months after the DISS report was published, Ofsted’s national SEN adviser, Janet Thompson, told a conference that the £5 billion a year spent on special educational needs had not helped pupils with difficulties to achieve better exam results. Ms Thompson’s comments were supported at the same conference⁷ by Hardip Begol, deputy director for SEN and disabilities at the DCSF. He said that headteachers were not putting SEN budgets to good use – and referred to the amount being spent on unskilled teaching assistants rather than specialist training for staff. In November 2009, the Government’s new Communication Champion, Jean Gross, expressed concern about the increasing number of disadvantaged pupils who have been failing to reach expected standards in English and maths at age

11. The Times Educational Supplement reported her as saying that more specialist teachers, rather than TAs, would have to work with pupils with SEN⁸.

Further evidence that the DISS findings are influencing policy-makers’ thinking on the education of pupils with SEN has been provided by a government document, *Breaking the link between special educational needs and low attainment: everyone’s business* (March 2010). This report emphasises the need for targeted deployment of support staff and refers to the DISS project⁹.

Cambridge Primary Review

The DISS findings were referred to in this high-level review¹⁰, published in October 2009. Its final report acknowledged that increased numbers of TAs had enabled teachers to spend more time with children. However, it concluded: “TAs are no substitute for teachers, or for the expertise which a modern curriculum requires.” The report, which put the needs of vulnerable children at its heart, went on to call for a full review of primary school staffing, and for training for TAs in working with small groups and children with SEN.

Leading think tank

Demos highlighted the headline finding from DISS in its recent (2010) report on the risks of educational disengagement in the UK. It cited the impact of TA support on pupil progress as a warning against the customary practice of spending funding for SEN statements on TAs¹¹.

Local authorities and regional administrations

Although government guidance is not due to be issued until the autumn of 2010 there is evidence that the DISS findings have already caused regional policy-makers, local authorities and schools to reconsider how they deploy support staff.

The Government Office of the South

“[This project is] the only ‘properly constituted studies of [teaching] assistants’ impact”.

**Professor Alison Wolf,
King’s College London**



East has created a DISS Innovations Group to look at successful deployment of TAs in schools in the region. Some local authorities have also asked the DISS team to address their staff. One conference presentation by the researchers in Coventry in March, 2010 prompted the following comments from a senior education adviser:

"Your presentation was superb and has given our schools a great deal of food for thought. We have received numerous comments from delegates that they want to devote more time to looking at how they can respond effectively to the challenges posed by the DISS project findings. Some of them have said it reflects what they felt they knew/suspected. Clearly, some have already begun to confront the issues." Peter McCann, Senior Adviser (Head of SEN Support Services), Coventry City Council

Response from academics

A 2010 CentreForum report on public-sector spending by Professor Alison Wolf of King's College London describes DISS and the Class Size and Pupil-Adult Ratios project (also led by Peter Blatchford) as the only "properly constituted studies of [teaching] assistants' impact". She said that they confound the "purely British

phenomenon" of employing large numbers of TAs "on the basis of no robust evidence whatsoever"¹².

The future

The DISS team have been invited to give keynote addresses at several national practitioner conferences and seminars. They are continuing to offer in-service training and are writing articles for academic journals and practitioner publications.

As they recently won two further grants for follow-up research they will also be:

- i) working with schools to find school-based solutions to the TA deployment and preparation problems highlighted by the DISS research
- ii) for the first time, building a detailed, day-to-day description of teaching and support for pupils with SEN statements.

Further reading

The final DISS report, published in August 2009, can be found at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RR154.pdf>

A summary of the report is available at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RB1481.pdf> ■

1. Teaching assistants boost teachers' productivity but not pupils' progress <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/newsEvents/31191.html>
2. BERA participants rated it the best symposium of the conference in an online evaluation.
3. The recent articles are listed at <http://www.schoolsupportstaff.net/otherpubs.html>
4. More information on this work can be found at www.schoolsupportstaff.net/inset.html
5. Lamb Inquiry: Special Education Needs and Parental Confidence, DCSF, December 2009 <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/lambinquiry/downloads/8553-lamb-inquiry.pdf>
6. Improving parental confidence in the special educational needs system: an implementation plan, DCSF, February 2010 <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/lambinquiry/downloads/8623-DCSF-Lamb%20Implementation%20Plan.pdf>
- 7 Janet Thompson and Hardip Begol addressed the "Developing Inclusive School Leaders of the Future" conference organised by Nasen (formerly the National Association for Special Educational Needs). The conference was held on October 2, 2010.
8. MADDERN, K. (2009), 'SEN pupils struggle as support programmes fail to make mark', The Times Educational Supplement, 27th November <http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6028573>
9. Breaking the link between special educational needs and low attainment: everyone's business <http://publications.everychildmatters.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/00213-2010DOM-EN.pdf>
10. The Cambridge Primary Review <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/index.html>
11. Ex Curricula http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Ex-curricula_-_web.pdf?1267034385.
12. More Than We Bargained For <http://www.centreforum.org/assets/pubs/more-than-we-bargained-for.pdf>

