# Effective teaching assistant deployment

Does your primary school make the most of its teaching assistants? Do your teachers and teaching assistants work together and communicate effectively before and during lessons? In this Best Practice Focus, *Sara Alston* looks at effective teaching assistant deployment in the classroom in order to achieve maximum impact on pupil outcomes

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# Using teaching assistants effectively in the classroom

Those of us working in schools recognise the importance and value of teaching assistants.

Their many roles, include those directly involved in learning (such as supporting children with SEND, running interventions, giving additional input to small groups, helping with reading and phonics) and non-pedagogical roles (delivering speech therapy, supporting children with SEMH needs, phoning parents, marking assessments, gathering resources, playground duties, first aid, managing lost property, and much more). This includes vital support for many of our most vulnerable pupils.

Yet it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit teaching assistants and their roles are under constant threat and scrutiny. It is key that we support teaching assistants and ensure that we work with them effectively to support children's learning and wellbeing. To do this requires us to think about their roles and how teachers work with them in the classroom.

Much of the excellent work by the MITA (Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants) project and the Education Endowment Foundation's work (EEF, 2021) is aimed at school leaders and there has been little focus on (or training for) class teachers on working successfully with their teaching assistants. This is the subject of this *Best Practice Focus*.

## The role of a TA

The role of the teaching assistant in its current form was never planned. It developed organically in response to educational issues not directly related to teaching assistants or their role: the move towards increased inclusion, the drive to raise standards, and concerns about teacher workload and retention.

This has meant a change from a "mum's army" helping in classrooms to the current expectations of teaching assistants as para-professionals leading learning. This has forced staff to adapt as their roles have changed. Not all of them have been able to do this, nor have school structures always changed to support them effectively.

The issue is exacerbated for schools as there is very little Department for Education (DfE) guidance about teaching assistants and their roles.

● Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011): A single bullet point under Standard 8: Fulfil wider professional responsibilities, which includes "deploy support staff effectively", but without any explanation or detail.

● SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015): "Teachers are responsible and accountable for the progress and development of the pupils in their class, including where pupils access support from teaching assistants or specialist staff."

● ITT Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019): Six mentions of teaching assistants in 49 pages. These focus on trainees making "effective use of teaching assistants and other adults in the classroom under the supervision of expert colleagues" and on Standard 8 of the Teachers' Standards that "teaching assistants can support pupils more effectively when they are prepared for lessons by teachers, and when teaching assistants supplement rather than replace support from teachers".

● Early Career Framework (DfE, 2019): Repeats the information from the Teachers' Standards and ITT Core Content Framework. It notes teachers should "build effective working relationships by seeking ways to support individual colleagues and working as part of a team".

This is a lot of "what" and very little "how" about working effectively with teaching assistants, although the SEND Improvement Plan (DfE, 2023) does set out the importance of "supporting and upskilling teaching assistants so they are deployed effectively" and includes proposals for research to identify best practice in the teaching assistant role as well as new practice guides and a trial of new national standards for SEND.

## Different job titles

The lack of clarity about teaching assistant roles is increased by the wide range of different job titles given in different schools for support staff working in classrooms. I have found at least 18 different job titles and individual teaching assistants often undertake more than one role, plus additional roles outside the classroom.

Recognising and understanding the roles we want teaching assistants to undertake is an important step in working with them more effectively.

However, teaching assistant roles generally fit into four main types:

**General TA:** In many schools, there is a standard allocation of teaching assistant support given to a class regardless of the children's specific needs. This is usually weighted towards support in literacy and numeracy lessons, the younger years and in year 6. These roles are, generally, to support learning and the teacher as the teacher sees fit for educational and practical tasks. They may provide support for those with SEND, English as an additional language, Pupil Premium, etc. In many cases, they will have additional roles outside the classroom, such as playground duties, first aid, admin tasks and emotional and pastoral support.

**Specialists providing specific provisions and interventions outside the classroom:**
Increasingly, teaching assistants are expected to lead intervention groups of different kinds. In addition, some teaching assistants have additional training and/or specific qualifications and lead specialist interventions related to academic needs or support for children with specific SEND or SEMH needs.

**Early years support:** In line with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Framework, there is often at least one additional adult in a reception class. This supports the "key person" approach, which is statutory throughout the early years, including reception classes. For more see the *Birth to 5 Matters* guidance (Early Education, 2021, p30).

**Targeted support for special needs within the classroom:**
Support by an adult is often seen as the default provision for a child with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). The move to increased inclusion has been a major driver in the increased number of teaching assistants. Many are employed to provide SEND support.

## Changing the language of one-to-ones

There is considerable evidence that receiving more teaching assistant support can inhibit rather than promote children's learning. Nevertheless many teachers and senior leaders believe that an EHCP indicates that a child needs and is entitled to a one-to-one teaching assistant. The evidence is that this is not what support should look like in a mainstream classroom (Sharples et al, 2018).

Moreover, only very rarely does an EHCP actually state that a child should receive one-to-one support, for more than short periods, except in a few exceptional cases where a child has a high level of physical disability or medical needs, significant developmental needs, and/or significant safeguarding concerns.

An approach to SEND based solely on one-to-one support for those with the highest level of needs quickly leaves those with less significant needs (at SEN Support level) to flounder unsupported and becomes exclusion presented as inclusion.

All children need to be allowed to become independent learners – experiencing success and failure and opportunities to tackle tasks on their own. While teaching assistants should work to prompt and support a child's learning, it is vital that the child does not become dependent on the teaching assistant for their learning.

Ensuring effective and inclusive support for children with SEND requires us to challenge the idea and language of one-to-one support. Schools need to be clear that teaching assistants should "supplement what teachers do, not replace them" (Sharples et al, 2018). Fundamental to this is building a team around the child so that the teacher and teaching assistant work together to provide the support children need.

## Moving past 'Velcro TAs'

Key to making this effective is moving beyond the "Velcro TA", who constantly works with a specific child. This approach can lead teaching assistants and teachers to believe that the teaching assistant should be with "their child" only and at all times. It leads to an over-reliance for both the child and teacher on the teaching assistant.

An alternative model is the "helicopter TA", who prepares the child for learning by "dropping down" the strategies and resources needed. Then they "lift off and hover", leaving the child to work independently. They can drop down again when the child needs more support to refocus or use the strategies and resources before "taking off" once again (see figure 1). This approach means that teaching assistants can provide children with the support they need and opportunities to learn independently. It can also free them to work with other children.

## Team around the child

A key element of moving away from the Velcro TA is building a team around the child. Fundamental to this is ensuring all children, including those with SEND, have time with their teacher, and that any adult in the room can and does work with any child.

Effective moving away from the Velcro TA depends on teachers having regular time with their teaching assistants to discuss the children in the class, including those with SEND. They need a shared sense of how the children are progressing to determine whether the support they are providing is working and identify any additional or different support that may be required.

The move away from the language of a one-to-one support and single teaching assistant ➤

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**Figure 1. The differences, advantages and disadvantages of the 'Velcroed' teaching assistant versus the helicopter approach**

| Velcro | Helicopter |
|---|---|
| The teaching assistant is constantly with the child, working directly with them | The teaching assistant starts the child off on an activity then moves away, leaving them to work independently. They work with other children in the meantime. They return to their focus child to: check in; help with any problems; reassure, refocus. They then move away again, returning as and when needed |
| **Advantages** | **Advantages** |
| ● There is always someone there when the child needs help<br>● It is clear that the child has support which can make them and their parents feel secure<br>● It is easy to differentiate work to the child's level | ● The child can develop independence<br>● The child learns that they can do things on their own<br>● The teaching assistant can also support others |
| **Disadvantages** | **Disadvantages** |
| ● The child becomes dependent on having an adult there to attempt any task<br>● It undermines the child's and adults' belief that the child can do anything on their own<br>● The child becomes dependent on the teaching assistant and separated from the teacher<br>● The child becomes separated from their peers | ● We will not always get the timing right so there is a risk that the child might not have support available at the point when they need it |

working solely with a particular child, does not exclude the child from having a "key person", as we do in early years.

The key person is the child's main contact and "holds the child in mind". But they are part of a team who share the education, information and care of the child. Using the language of a "key person" can provide the support and security that many need around the provision for a child with SEND, without the need for a nominated one-to-one teaching assistant and the implications and expectations that the child and adult will work together to the exclusion of others.

## Models of deployment
There are many ways of ensuring that all children access teacher time and are not taught exclusively by a teaching assistant . These include:

**Rotating through the week:** Most classes are organised in some way into groups that work together or at least on the same task at the same time. Often the teacher and teaching assistant(s) will work with the same groups each day or for a few days at a time. By rotating through the week, the teacher can ensure that they and any additional adults work with each group at some point during the week.

**Flip the roles:** Often the teaching assistant sits with a group while the teacher undertakes the "roving" or "triaging" role, answering children's questions, picking up/challenging misconceptions, and marking work as they go. Instead of the teaching assistant staying still and the teacher moving, this pattern can be reversed so that the teacher is able to give focused attention to a group while the teaching assistant does the problem-solving and class management.

**Models of 'cut away':** Often all the children in a class sit through the whole introduction to a piece of learning. This can mean that children who have already grasped a concept or strategy are listening to something they already know, while others who might lack the foundational learning or key vocabulary are sitting through something that they cannot access. In both cases, these children are learning little and can often respond with disruption.

Developed from the work of Dr Keith Watson for NACE (Watson, 2021), the idea of "cut aways" is to reduce the time that children are listening to an input which is not promoting learning. There are various models (see figure 2).

When using these, it is important that the "more able" and "less able" groups are not static but reflect children's strengths and difficulties with the day's task. For example, a child who struggles with number work may shine at shape work and vice-versa.

**Zoning the room:** The room is divided into zones and each adult takes responsibility for the support of the children in an area of the room. This reduces the number of children that adults are trying to observe and work with. It avoids all the adults becoming clustered around one group of children while others are left to flounder.

## Supporting learning across the five lesson phases
Effective support for children needs teaching assistants to be active and engaged in learning throughout the lesson, not expected to appear and "support" at certain points.

In our 2021 book *The Inclusive Classroom*, Daniel Sobel and I looked at the structure of the lesson in five phases and how to promote inclusion and ensure effective differentiation through small tweaks and adaptations.

Effective teaching assistant support requires a combination of key elements of support that occur throughout the lesson and particular strategies that are implemented at key points.

Here follow some strategies to support throughout the five phases of the lesson:

### Phase one
Phase one covers the transitions, including entering the classroom and preparing to learn.

If we can get entry into the classroom right, this sets up the whole lesson for success. This is often particularly difficult when a teaching assistant enters the room with the children. But this can be an opportunity for them to model getting ready to learn. Also they can support children by:

- Meeting and greeting: Many children benefit from a personalised meet and greet to help them feel safe to come into the classroom. This can take various forms:
  - Spending a few minutes with an adult as soon as they arrive in the room.
  - Coming in earlier or later than their peers or through a different entrance.
  - Having a set place in the line and/or walking from the playground to the classroom with an adult.
  - Having a familiar activity to complete.

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- Visual timetables: These are used in many classrooms to reduce uncertainty and set out the expected routines for the day ahead. Many children benefit from a smaller, personal timetable, particularly if they struggle to see themselves as part of the class group or their day is going to be different to that of their peers.
- Focused interventions and supports.
- Pre-learning to ensure children have the vocabulary to access learning.

### Phase two
This covers delivering and receiving instructions and whole class engagement and is often seen as the part of the lesson that can be missed (by teaching assistant or child) with the least impact on learning, so therefore the best time to run interventions that require either the teaching assistant and/or the most vulnerable children to be missing. However, this is a key part of the lesson for teaching assistant support to enable children to focus on and engage with the teacher's input and understand their instructions.

If the planning has not been shared with a teaching assistant, they may need to be in the room as they will be hearing for the first time the information they will be expected to teach and differentiate. Even if they have shared the planning, they could also support children by:

- Engaging with instructions (although not repeating them, as this causes children to experience "echo teaching").
- Working with individuals so that they can share ideas without shouting out.
- Supporting oral rehearsal so that children are more able to share their ideas.
- Providing visual prompts for understanding or focus.
- Modelling questions and possible responses.
- Observing who is and is not accessing the learning.

### Phase three
This is when children are working on their own or in small groups and is often when there are the highest expectations of teaching assistant support. At this point, many teaching assistants will take a group out to work on differentiated

learning outside the classroom or "take ownership" of a group within the classroom – often the lower achieving or those with SEND – and lead and/or differentiate their learning.

There is a risk this approach becomes an inadvertent form of segregation as the most vulnerable learners are separated from the teacher and responsibility for their learning is outsourced to the teaching assistant.

Teaching assistants can support in the classroom by:
- Enabling a focus on learning by reducing the lesson admin demands, e.g. writing the date, title, etc, so the child can focus on the learning without getting overwhelmed by other tasks.
- Providing a prompted start.
- Supporting self-talk and metacognition.
- Providing different or additional visual and/or concrete resources.
- Enabling different ways of recording, including IT use.

### Phase four
This is when group work takes place. Often adults take a back seat during group work, but for many children working with their peers adds a layer of anxiety and difficulty to any task. For those who struggle to understand and/or manage social interactions and communication, asking them to work with others requires them to manage two learning activities simultaneously: academic and social. This can make both more difficult.

Additionally, being part of a group can make a child's difficulties more visible to their peers. Some children need support to understand that they are part of a particular group and need adult prompts both to join their group and fulfil their role as part of it. This can be supported by a teaching assistant modelling and facilitating interactions.

### Phase five
The final phase is the last five minutes of the lesson. At the end of the lesson your teaching assistant's focus is often on tidying up, preparing resources for the next lesson or moving on to the next place they are needed, so their interactions with children are often fleeting and/or focused on organisational issues.

However, this loses vital learning and the lack of support at this point can undermine a child's readiness for the next lesson. In many ways, you want your teaching assistant to use the same strategies as during the input, including modelling, supporting focus, and supporting the rehearsal of ideas. Teaching assistants can also:
- Provide over-learning and pick up on misconceptions.
- Support children to finish learning, including providing individual time checks.
- Provide opportunities to identify and share success.
- Offer physical and emotional support to leave the room and manage the transition to whatever comes next.

### Key elements of support
In addition, there are certain key strategies which support learning, engagement and wellbeing throughout the lesson.

**Supporting learning, not task-completion:** As many teaching assistants have little training about what learning looks like, they can assume that learning and task-completion are one and the same. This can cause them to take over the learning and over-prompt children to make sure that the work is finished, and the child has something in their book.

**Breaking down the task:** "Scaffolding" is about simplifying

tasks so that a child can attempt each part by themselves with specific and structured help where needed. The adult's role is to prompt the child to know what to do when they are not sure, using the key question: "What do you need to do next?" But not by reminding them at each stage of the process or completing the task for them. To do this well, teaching assistants need both training and to understand the learning.

**Learning from mistakes:** We learn from making mistakes, yet at the same time we try to protect children, especially those with SEND, from making mistakes. Perhaps we worry about the impact on their self-esteem and that it will lead to disengagement or a meltdown. We may even fear that they are "behind", so don't have time for mistakes. But mistakes challenge and change our thinking.

**Making questioning effective:** A reoccurring theme in the research already cited about teaching assistants' impact on learning is that teaching assistants are overly reliant on closed questions and dialogue that limits rather than extends children's thinking. To counter this, teachers need to share their planning, identify teaching assistants' subject knowledge (or lack of it), and be clear about the kind of questions they want teaching assistants to use by:
- Including prompt questions on their planning.

- Providing examples of question stems that can be used, for example from Bloom's taxonomy.
- Being clear about the difference between open and closed questions, the different forms of answer they might elicit, and when each can be used most effectively.
- Emphasising the importance of "thinking time" – not expecting children to respond immediately and giving them time to formulate their answers.

**Use of visuals:** Visuals are a key tool to support children's understanding of language and access to learning. These include:
- Prompts for focus and attention – e.g. reminders about "good sitting" or "good listening".
- Prompts for instructions. A key teaching assistant role is supporting children's access to instructions, including putting the instructions into a visual form so they are easier to understand and recall.
- Prompts to support vocabulary development, comprehension and processing. Using visuals, teaching assistants can help children to understand or recall vocabulary and thus engage more easily in learning.
Note: Many children need explicit teaching and modelling before they are able to use visuals effectively.

**Support for sensory issues:** Children may need support with ➤

sensory regulation at any point in the lesson, including immediately when they enter the room. Many children, like adults, struggle to sit still. Fidgeting and fiddling may support their engagement and learning. They often need teaching assistant support to manage and regulate this, so that it supports rather than distracts from learning.

## Time to communicate

Differentiation should be led by the teacher and rooted in small tweaks and adaptations within quality first teaching, not made the responsibility of a teaching assistant. For this to happen successfully requires good teacher and teaching assistant communication. Finding time for this can be a huge challenge.

Despite the research showing the importance of teachers and teaching assistants sharing planning and liaison time (Sharples et al, 2018), this is often beyond the reach of schools' budgets. As such, schools often rely on goodwill and the relationship between teacher and teaching assistant for the sharing of planning and information about children.

These limits mean that much of this communication is superficial or focused on giving instructions. This does not support the development of a shared language and understanding of the learning which is crucial for effective teacher and teaching assistant working.

## Sharing planning

For teaching assistants to be able to engage with and follow planning, they need to see, share and understand it. This includes being given time to read it.

If teaching assistants (and teachers) are not prepared, it impacts the effectiveness of their work. Yet all too often teaching assistants are expected to "wing it" as the planning is not shared in advance.

Schools may say that planning is available for all staff, but few teaching assistants have the time during the school day to find, read, process, and absorb it. It is important that planning is made quickly and easily accessible. This includes annotations to teaching slides. To get the basic communications about planning down to a useful minimum, I use three quick, but key, questions:

**What is the learning intention?** What the children are going to be learning, i.e. the focus of the lesson. This needs to include enough information to be useful, not just "addition", but "addition with exchange using formal methods with two and three digit numbers".

**What is the key vocabulary?** What new, technical, or unusual vocabulary will the children need to access learning? It is really helpful to highlight the vocabulary on the planning and/or slides. What are the words that children may not know or remember? What is the key

Effective communication between teachers and teaching assistants needs to include:
● An understanding of the children, their needs and barriers to learning, but also their strengths and motivators.
● What is being taught, why and how. Sadly, the "what" often overshadows the other two. As with the children, a teaching assistant needs to understand the learning journey and context of the learning for it to make sense.
● The content of a particular lesson and what the teaching assistant needs to do to support learning. This may include who they are going to work with, although this may need to be flexible within the lesson.
● The strategies and approaches the teacher is going to use or wants the teaching assistant to use to support the whole class or individuals.
● Feedback on how the learning went – key for assessment and planning next steps.
Implicit within this needs to be an understanding that teacher-teaching assistant communications are a two-way process which recognises the importance of what teaching assistants observe and have to share, as well as the teacher's input.

vocabulary they will need to access the learning? These are the words a teaching assistant could use as prompts for learning and as the focus for any pre-learning intervention.

**What is the outcome?** What are the children expected to produce by the end of the lesson? Consider what flexibility there is in this, so the task can be adapted to meet children's needs and different ways of demonstrating their learning.

## Feedback

In the EYFS, making observations is a key part of the information-gathering and evidence about children's learning. This culture of thinking about what children are doing and learning as part of daily practice needs to continue as we move up the primary school and involve all the adults in the room, particularly when they are working directly with individuals or groups.

A key starting point is communicating, using a marking code or similar, the level of support a child needed to access and engage in a particular task. There is a huge difference in learning between a child who wrote a piece independently and a child who orally rehearsed it with prompting and then was supported to write each line. Yet the outcome may look very similar.

Some schools actively encourage "live marking" within lessons and promote teaching assistant involvement in it, others do not. Even where a teaching assistant has written a comment in a child's book, it does not always provide the teacher with the information they need to understand how the child approached and responded to the learning.

Equally, it is not sensible or practical to ask teaching assistants to write long comments in children's books or elsewhere. A simple feedback form or writing short comments on sticky notes that can either be stuck onto the child's book and removed later or stuck onto a copy of the planning are usually effective and time appropriate.

Whatever the format it is worth considering and discussing what is and is not useful feedback to ensure a teaching assistant spends more time supporting children than writing about how they supported them.

| Their strengths: What are they good at? | | Their barriers to learning: What is getting in the way of their learning? What is it they find difficult? |
|---|---|---|
| Their motivators: What are they interested in and what do they enjoy? | Name: Alex N Other Year: 4 Class: | Their needs, difficulties, and weaknesses |

**Figure 4. The Classroom Contract sets out the responsibilities of each member of the staff team in the classroom and can be a catalyst for effective teacher-teaching assistant working and communication**

| Points in the lesson and related expectations, roles & responsibilities | Role of the teacher: Name | Role of the TA: Name |
|---|---|---|
| Before the lesson <br>• Any preparation needed? <br>• Sharing of planning | | |
| Coming into class. Getting ready to learn <br>• Supporting transitions | | |
| Giving instructions and whole class inputs <br>• Active support for learning <br>• Personalising instructions <br>• Use of visuals | | |
| When children are working on their own <br>• Prompts for learning <br>• Who works with whom? <br>• How is this shared? | | |
| When children are working in groups <br>• Inside the classroom <br>• Outside the classroom | | |
| At the end of the lesson <br>• Supporting transitions <br>• Involvement in assessment and marking <br>• Tidying up | | |
| After the lesson <br>• Feedback | | |

A point to add here is the importance of sharing information to build a picture of the whole child. Too often, teacher and teaching assistants' communications become focused on what the child can't do and finds difficult, missing their strengths and motivators.

By identifying a child's strengths and interests, the class team can use these to mitigate their barriers to learning. By working together teachers and teaching assistants, ideally alongside the child and their family, can create a pupil profile (see figure 3) which shares and

collates information about the child.

## Supporting joint working

The lack of training and recognised standards for teaching assistants, combined with the lack of training for teachers on how to work with them, makes it difficult to ensure effective joint working.

As such, clear structures to support/promote communication and a shared understanding of the different roles within the classroom are vital. This ensures the consistency children need to feel

safe which supports their learning and behaviour.

Developing a "Classroom Contract" (see figure 4) setting out the responsibilities of each member of the staff team in the classroom can support this communication. While these may include certain common elements across a school, they need to be personalised to reflect the different children and staff in each class.

The "contract" should cover class routines and set clear expectations but will not cover the unexpected – and as we all know, much of school life is responding to the unexpected. As such, the contract should retain the flexibility to respond to individual needs and situations.

Successful classroom contracts are working documents that can be adjusted as needs evolve, including any changes of staff and as the children mature during the year.

Contracts also offer prompts for the teacher and teaching assistant roles at each stage of the lesson as well as what happens before (planning) and after (feedback).

It is important to balance providing enough information to support clarity and consistency without making the Classroom Contract too long and unwieldy. Remember, often the discussion is more important than what is recorded.

## An inclusive classroom

Fundamental to the development of an inclusive classroom is that the primary responsibility and oversight of every child's learning remains with the teacher, and not the teaching assistant. The needs of all children "must be addressed, first and foremost, through excellent classroom teaching" (Sharples et al, 2018).

Since the 1978 Warnock Report, there has been an on-going debate on the meaning of inclusion, including the role of the teaching assistant in promoting this. However, much of the teaching assistant support for children with SEND has become focused on accessing learning (often at a piece-by-piece level), so issues of inclusion across the curriculum and wider school life are lost.

Teaching assistants can find themselves focusing on task-completion, rather than developing children's skills to access learning with increased independence.

**ℹ INFORMATION & REFERENCES**

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▶ Watson: The 'cutaway' approach to ability grouping: Who do I need here now? NACE Blog, 2021: *http://bit.ly/3Xiy6RU*

Children with SEND often spend much of their time in intervention groups or seated separately within the classroom – often to the back or side of the room. This can mean that their learning is effectively outsourced to a teaching assistant, who becomes their primary educator in place of the teacher. This can become exclusion or segregation masquerading as inclusion.

This can be exacerbated where the model of teaching assistant deployment in schools is based on "what we have always done", rather than on considering the needs of the children in a particular cohort or on our developing understanding of inclusion.

To change this, we need to prioritise and promote effective teacher-teaching assistant communication so that their shared understanding of learning supports all the children in their care. **hu**