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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2012.729892>

Reassessing the impact of teaching assistants: how research challenges practice and policy, by P. Blatchford, A. Russell, and R. Webster, London, Routledge, 2011, 163 pp., £80 (hardback); £21.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780415687638

Surprising, unexpected, counterintuitive, troubling; these are a few of the terms Blatchford, Russell and Webster use to describe findings from their groundbreaking research based on the *Deployment and Impact of Support Staff Project* conducted in England and Wales between 2003 and 2008. If provocative terms are not enough to pique your interest in reading this book, maybe you will be persuaded by the fact that this accessibly presented volume summarises data from the largest interrelated set of studies internationally conducted to date on the use and impact of teacher assistants (TAs) in schools. This longitudinal, mixed-methods investigation included data from thousands of students with and without special educational needs and school personnel. It will encourage you to reassess what has long passed as conventional wisdom regarding the use and impact of TAs.

Many educators and policy-makers have viewed the increasing numbers of TAs to support teachers and pupils as a logical, desirable, cost-effective solution to confronting contemporary challenges faced by schools such as teacher workload concerns and inclusion of students with special educational needs. While the data suggest some positive aspects of utilising TAs, they also lead to the authors' concern that pupils in most need of educational supports are being let down by current classroom practice that relies on insufficiently prepared and inadequately supervised TAs with unclear and potentially inappropriate roles. Their findings replicate some earlier research, but more importantly have broken new ground by exploring the relationship between TA support and academic achievement, and providing plausible explanations for their unexpected findings. Their discoveries are bolstered by the naturalistic design of their research. Unlike intervention studies, where researchers test a promising practice under controlled conditions with small samples, these data represent what actually was happening in hundreds of schools under typical conditions.

The introductory chapter summarises how the utilisation of TAs intersects with key issues facing schools. Since all of the data were collected in the UK, understandably the book delves most deeply into the UK context (e.g. history of school service delivery, government initiatives), although it also draws upon professional literature from other countries. The authors make clear that this book is not intended to be a practical guide for schools, but rather a presentation of descriptive data with implications for policy and practice. Chapter 1 first introduces the reader to the *Wider Pedagogical Role* model, a conceptual framework consisting of three elements: (a) preparedness, (b) deployment and (c) practice, which are relied on later in the book.

Chapter 2 explores the impact of TAs on teachers, teaching and pupils (e.g. pupil behavior, academic attainment, teacher workloads, teacher stress levels, job satisfaction, pupil engagement, active interaction with adults). Some of the most compelling data in the book

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appear in this chapter. For example, the authors explain that prior to statistical analyses, they expected they might find some small positive relationship between the support provided by TAs and pupils' progress. Yet the data showed consistent negative relationships between the amount of support from TAs and pupils' academic progress that was not accounted for by pupil characteristics (e.g. special educational needs status).

The authors reported TAs contributed to teachers' job satisfaction by reducing their workload and stress levels while aiding with classroom management. While teachers were satisfied having TAs in their classes, often viewing them as essential, this support was not necessarily effective for students, especially those at the greatest risk of school failure. Support from TAs did not so much improve teacher practice, but rather shifted responsibility for students with special educational needs to TAs, providing those students with correspondingly less interaction from teachers; TAs were not providing additional support, but replacement support.

Chapter 3 (Characteristics of TAs and conditions of employment) provides valuable background information, while the subsequent three chapters present data and implications organised to coincide with the components of the *Wider Pedagogical Model*: Chapter 4 (Preparedness), Chapter 5 (Deployment) and Chapter 6 (Practice). These chapters raise numerous issues (e.g. how the use of TAs may interfere with teacher–pupil interactions, instructional role creep, questionable quality of instruction provided by TAs, lack preparedness of teachers to supervise TAs). The discussion of instructional talk analysis in Chapter 6 is particularly novel.

Chapter 7 (Conclusions) offers implications for policy, practice and future research. It presents opposing views about whether TAs should have instructional roles. To their credit, the authors do not suggest simplistic or unequivocal answers; rather they invite readers to engage this fundamental issue, one they remind us has received too little attention as schools have forged ahead with the increasing use and expanded pedagogical roles of TAs. Further, they encourage readers to consider the deployment of TAs from an equity perspective, asking whether parents of pupils without special educational needs would find it acceptable to have TAs replacing qualified teachers to deliver their own children's instruction. They are clear that TAs are not to blame for the current state of affairs. They suggest the systems issues that have led to the current predicament are the responsibilities of policy-makers and school leaders to solve. Despite their concerns about the current utilisation of TAs, they caution that using their data and analyses as a rationale to unilaterally or abruptly cut or reduce the number of TAs in classrooms would be inappropriate and counterproductive. They advocate the need for systems change and encourage us to start by envisioning the teacher's role (without TA support) for *all* pupils, before exploring how TAs might provide appropriate supplemental supports.

This book represents a major contribution to the field. While it has its most direct implications for UK schools, it also should have international appeal. Blatchford, Russell and Webster's *Reassessing the Impact of Teaching Assistants* provides an essential read for school leaders seeking to develop conceptually sound models of inclusive service delivery that account for the full range of student diversity.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14748460.2012.729893>