Teaching Assistants Briefing Paper

Introduction

There has been very little national recognition of, or guidance about, the growth in the numbers of teaching assistants and other learning support staff in schools. Schools have been left largely to their own devices in terms of how such staff are employed and deployed. In addition, the use of such staff has developed at a different pace and in different ways in primary and secondary schools. As a result, it is not surprising that the range and quality of practice is very diverse.

Between 1995 and 2000, the number of primary teaching assistants increased by 48%. At least 60,000 extra support staff have been promised by the Government by 2006. In January 2001, the most recent figures available, 63,177 FTE teaching assistants were employed in primary schools in England, 15,466 in secondary schools and 13,401 in special schools. These figures mask significant differences between and within schools. There are many primary teachers with no access to teaching assistants support and others who receive limited support. For example, support is not always equally targeted at all classes, especially in schools where resources are limited, due to the pressures relating to KS2 test results and targets.

In primary schools, teaching assistants are increasingly being used at the expense of providing more basic support to teachers, such as classroom preparation, administration, tidying and display.

The withdrawal of groups of pupils by teaching assistants, for example, is now commonplace, although it removes assistant from the immediate oversight of teachers and requires assistants to bear responsibility for managing the learning and behaviour of pupils. This presents teachers with additional difficulties in monitoring the work of teaching assistants and schools with pedagogical and legal considerations, which have been insufficiently addressed by Government.

Teaching assistants provide invaluable help and support to teachers and pupils in our schools but they are no substitute for teachers. The preparation teachers make for their teaching does not produce hard and fast blue prints. Teachers adapt their plans throughout a lesson to respond to the needs of the pupils and expand their learning. That is not a role that a teaching assistant can take over.

The Union welcomes the prospect of a debate about the role of teachers and the number and scope of classroom assistants, which may help address the excessive workload problem. It may make the teachers’ job more like that of their colleagues in Europe. If the Government’s proposals, however, are only a cheap answer to the problem of excessive workload and teacher shortages, they cannot expect the support of teachers.
Definition/ Blurring of Roles

The issue of extending the role of teaching assistants first surfaced in Estelle Morris’ speech, “Professionalism and Trust”, to the Social Market Foundation in November 2001. In it, she suggested that teaching should move away from the historic situation, where the direct education of pupils is delivered entirely by teachers, so that teachers could spend more time on their “core” tasks of lesson preparation, teaching and assessing pupils’ work. It was suggested that support staff might take on a number of teaching and supervisory duties currently carried out by teachers.

The Union surveyed members in 13 LEAs on the key proposals in “Professionalism and Trust”, as well as asking about their current work with teaching assistants and other support staff. Key findings included:

- Primary teachers receive more TA assistance but less admin support than secondary teachers;
- 13.2% received no TA support (secondary in particular). Of those who did have this support, 40.2% received it for a day or less. Primary teachers were significantly more likely to receive support for 2 – 3 days or more.
- 80% of teachers had received no training for working with TAs – over half felt they needed some or more;
- 76% thought that the most significant benefit of TA support was “additional support for groups/individual pupils”;
- 2/3 thought there were drawbacks to working with TAs – most common was “variation in TAs’ skills/qualifications/experience”, although primary teachers were more likely to mention “lack of time to work/plan with TAs”;
- Opinion was divided on whether TAs increased (58%) or reduced (41%) workload – written comments stressed that they changed the nature of the work rather than reduced it;
- In terms of the specific proposals contained in “Professionalism and Trust”:
  - the most positive response was for pastoral support to be undertaken by support staff, with 52% in favour (primary teachers in particular)
  - 40% against/25% for TAs supervising work set by teachers, without a teacher being present – significantly, 35% had mixed views about this;
  - members were equally divided on whether TAs should invigilate tests/exams and supervise lunchtime activities – secondary teachers were more likely to support both of these;
  - strongest disagreement was with the suggestion that TAs should cover for absent teachers (87.3%);
  - many of the responses stressed that low pay and lack of proper career structure for TAs needed to be addressed before any additions to their roles were proposed.
Like the DEMOS research from 2001, members saw TAs as crucial to freeing them from non-teaching tasks that take up so much of their time and energy. They were not hostile to the idea of managing other adults in the classroom, seeing it as potentially challenging and rewarding. However, they were adamant that they should not lose ultimate responsibility for pupils’ teaching and learning and that there needed to be a clear separation between the professional responsibilities of teachers and support staff.

Ever since “Professionalism and Trust”, the Government has emphasised the use of support staff as a means of tackling workload, which has become known as the “remodelling” agenda. This thinking is clear in a number of very recent revisions to existing programmes.

The QTS Standards have been revised to include requirements for trainees relating to working with support staff. There is currently a consultation exercise on revisions to the Induction Standards, which would add requirements for NQTs to demonstrate effective deployment, liaison with and management of TAs and to contribute to the development of other adults in the school. The Union has highlighted the difficulties of putting these into practice, for example, they may not actually work with support staff, there may be personality clashes between an experienced TA and young teacher: this is particularly significant for NQTs, as induction is now high stakes and failure to meet the Standards would prevent them from teaching in a state school again.

The National College for School Leadership is also revising its induction programme for new headteachers to include “alternative arrangements” for staff deployment in a school and exploring why workforce transformation is needed. It is to begin work shortly with the Teacher Training Agency and General Teaching Council for England in mapping “the skills, knowledge, principles and values that underpin effective practice in collaboration with, and professional leadership of, other adults and to identify the gaps in provision for all teachers”.

It is essential that adequate safeguards are in place to ensure the continued role of specialised language support and EMAG teachers, who provide tangible benefits in terms of the achievement of minority ethnic pupils. The increased deployment of teaching assistants in such roles, supported by Government, not only undermines teachers employed under EMAG but shows a lack of understanding with regard to the needs of children for whom English is an additional language.

The Union believes that a teaching assistant model which allows for both clearly defined roles on a national or local basis and affords flexibility in terms of deployment in schools should be developed. This would enable discussion and agreement between the assistant and the classroom teacher, in consultation with senior management as well as provide a framework for
nationally agreed general descriptions of duties for each of the identified groups of support staff.

While teachers welcome additional and well-trained support staff, the Union will oppose any deployment of assistants which undermines the role of qualified teachers or seeks to put them in a quasi-teacher role. Teachers have statutory responsibilities for teaching and assessing the achievements of their pupils and reporting their progress to parents. These responsibilities cannot be delegated to assistants.

**Workload Implications for teachers**

The Government has failed to acknowledge the workload implications for teachers of managing teaching assistants and other support staff. At best, the majority of teaching assistants are employed for the length of the school day, whilst classroom teachers, particularly in primary schools, have little or no non-contact time to liaise with teaching assistants.

Most schools employ classroom assistants on hours which exactly match the teaching sessions and make no allowance for planning or preparation time. The economics of employing a number of classroom assistants may also make it difficult for many schools to build in such time into each contract. Even in schools where teachers may have a small amount of non-contact time each day, this is by no means sufficient given the other demands on teachers' time.

The complex and fragmented deployment of teaching assistants in many schools, with one assistant working with children from a number of different classes, can often present a barrier to the development of teacher-assistant relationships and can increase teachers’ workload in their management still further.

In addition, there are significant time and resource implications for those who are expected to monitor and review the role of teaching assistants. Middle managers are already responsible for a team of teachers and, unless more time is found, overseeing the work of teaching assistants will remain problematic.

Any mentoring or support expected from teachers in relation to training for support staff should not be on an ad hoc basis. Any teacher involved should be given a reduced teaching load which reflects any additional responsibilities they might have and be given on-going support to evaluate their role. It should not simply be “tacked on” to the responsibilities of a teacher, as has been the case in some schools.

**Initial Teacher Training/Training for Teachers**

Teachers’ management responsibilities for teaching assistants have rarely been addressed in either ITT or subsequent professional development courses. Newly qualified teachers in particular often feel unprepared for
managing another, often older, adult in their class and consequently may feel threatened by that person, rather than viewing them as an asset.

The Union has argued consistently that this issue should be addressed on initial teacher training courses. Its proposals have been reflected in the new Professional Standards for QTS, which require ITT providers to include working with “additional adults who support pupils’ learning” as part of all ITT courses.

There has long been an assumption that teachers and assistants can work easily together. The recent ESRC funded project “Classroom Assistants in Primary Schools” found that one in five teachers had been involved in training to help them work with assistants. The overwhelming majority wanted (additional) training on this.

The Union will continue to press Government to consider the provision of appropriate professional development opportunities available to serving teachers with respect to managing paid support staff and other adults who work alongside them in the classroom and throughout the school.

**Administrative support**

The 2001 PwC Teacher Workload survey found that primary teachers spend an average of 1.6 hours per week on a range of administrative tasks, secondary teachers around two hours and special school teachers 2.3 hours. 25.9% of secondary teachers and 9.1% of primary teachers involved in the survey cited “general administrative duties” as a significant cause of excessive workload. 41.4% of teachers and 64.7% of headteachers believed that employing more administrative support would reduce their workload, the highest ranking response in that section of the survey.

In most schools, teachers are carrying out routine administrative tasks which could be undertaken by other staff. Historically, this is because of the perception that the undertaking of such tasks by teachers is at no financial cost to the school, whereas employing additional staff to take on these duties introduces a new cost. The cost in terms of teachers’ performance, morale, workload and stress level has rarely been taken into consideration. If the teacher shortage crisis is to be resolved the Government must understand that teachers need to be free to teach unencumbered by bureaucracy and administrative tasks capable of being performed by others.

A number of reports, including the 1999 and 2000 PwC bureaucracy studies on behalf of the DfEE, have made recommendations on supporting teachers with administrative time, and in 1998 the NUT commissioned a specific report on the topic, “Associate Staff Support for Teachers”, which recommended a figure of three hours administrative support per classroom teacher per week as a “preferred” model, with an “interim” model of half this amount. Yet the limited resources available to most schools have prevented them taking much action on these recommendations.
In Scotland, the McCrone agreement includes a list of tasks teachers should not routinely carry out and promised the appointment of up to 3,500 support staff in Scottish schools to resource this shift in duties. The 2001 PwC on teacher workload also recommends increasing administrative support provided for teachers, but does not quote figures.

In the joint submission to the STRB on teacher workload, the Union called for a limit to the activities which teachers may be asked to undertake, a list of administrative jobs which should not be undertaken by teachers routinely and a consequent increase in the number of administrative staff to support teachers. The Union’s list of administrative tasks has been adopted by Government and features in a poster sent out to all schools in England and Wales earlier this month. The accompanying letter to headteachers from Estelle Morris states that these tasks should be transferred to support staff as soon as possible.

The TUC-affiliates welcomed this development but have been pushing for the resources that are needed to implement it. The General Secretary has also publicly questioned why the DfES’s £2.6b underspend had not been used to support the transfer of admin work from teachers to support staff, as the CSR funding for more admin staff would not be available until next year.

A NUT News went out in September 2002 entitled “We’ll Just Say No”, which reproduces the DfES list of admin tasks. Up-dated bureaucracy protection advice was also issued at the start of the Autumn term and should continue to be used to support any members facing unreasonable admin demands at the moment.

The Latest Government Proposals

The Government issued formal proposals for extending the roles and responsibilities of support staff in “Reforming the School Workforce”, which was published in October 2002. “Support staff with appropriate induction and training and appropriate management and supervision can relieve teachers of many burdens”. The Government suggested that “some teaching activity can be undertaken by suitably trained staff without QTS”, providing that they are working within a clear system of leadership and supervision by a qualified teacher. For example, “cover supervisors” (support staff with appropriate training and skills) would “manage pupils in their own classroom when their teacher is absent”.

The NUT has always argued for a professionally trained, all graduate profession. It does not believe that the alleviation of excessive workload would be achieved through the use of support staff to teach rather than support teachers. The Government's actions suggest that it envisages support staff not only supporting teachers but also substituting for them. While there is a fundamental need to increase support to teachers, the Government's proposals are in danger of going too far. Only the NUT, in talks with Government, has pointed out these dangers and has sought to bring the
Government's focus back to the issues of excessive workload and an improved contract.