
The Evident Value of Teaching Assistants

Report of a UNISON survey

January 2013



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Background to the survey

UNISON carried out a survey of school leaders in autumn 2012 on the value of teaching assistants (TAs) to schools. This was in response to public debate on their role and at a time of focus on pupil attainment and resource utilisation. Some recent research on the pupil premium and the Sutton Trust Teaching and Learning Toolkit (2012) suggest that TAs have little or no impact on pupil attainment. These findings are set against a background of ever-increasing numbers of TAs, with nearly 220,000 employed in England in 2011 and evidence that much of the pupil premium funding is being spent to recruit more. The best people to throw light on this paradox are those responsible for raising standards in schools and employing TAs: school leaders. An online survey was launched, containing open-ended questions without the offer of options, to gather rich descriptions of how schools deploy TAs; about teamwork and training; how and why they are valued, as well as the barriers that leaders face in deploying them effectively. A wealth of qualitative detail emerged and is reflected in this report.

UNISON would like to thank the school leaders who provided full and often passionate responses to the survey. We would also like to thank the National Association of Head Teachers and the Association of School and College Leaders, who helped in its circulation.

Who replied to the survey?

There were 210 replies from school leaders in the majority of local authorities in England (a few replies from Wales and Scotland); just under 65 per cent were headteachers; nearly eight per cent were business managers and over 27 per cent were other members of the school leadership team.

What type of school or academy do they lead?

More than half of the respondents lead primaries; nearly 36 per cent secondary schools and just under 12 per cent lead special schools. There were 12 replies from atypical school settings, for example, a pupil referral unit.

Key findings

- ✓ With some caveats, all but a few of the respondents justified their use of TAs and some said that they could not run their school without them.
- ✓ The findings suggest that generalisations about the impact of TAs do not reflect the complex variations in their deployment at local level and in different types of school.

- ✓ Special schools are particularly reliant upon TA umbrella services, but all schools are dependent on them to support mainstreaming and inclusion.
- ✓ There is a complex mix of TA responsibilities; contrasting roles and an overlap between pastoral, pedagogic and administrative duties.
- ✓ The extent to which TAs are recruited and deployed as professionals and trained for their particular roles is inconsistent. Some schools give them alternative titles e.g. assistant teacher, to highlight their teaching role, while others deploy them more flexibly, without defined roles and interchangeably with learning support assistants (LSAs). The way in which they are recruited, managed, trained and deployed reflects the same variance in practice.
- ✓ There is a high level of cover supervision by TAs (50 per cent+) and specified work delivery (40 per cent+) was evident.
- ✓ The majority of schools use Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs), often in demanding roles: teaching; with SEN pupils; supporting children, young people and parents; and in management roles. Leaders value the flexibility that they offer.
- ✓ The deployment and management of teachers and TAs as a team was widely reported, with a few exceptions. Some reported a training deficit and a need for good practice examples for leaders. Time to liaise, plan and assess pupils together seems to be in short supply.
- ✓ Performance management, though sometimes formal or linked to line-management practices, was often subjective, relying on a sense of TA effectiveness. A variety of practices, like lesson observation, feed-back from colleagues, pupils and parents, or a general assessment of pupil progress, was reported.
- ✓ Leaders were consistent in identifying the problems that school leaders face in the effective deployment of TAs: lack of funding; training and development opportunity deficit; poor pay and conditions of service and general deployment issues, which encompassed working with teachers; job demands and how they are managed.
- ✓ Leaders suggested that a reduction in TAs would have an impact on children with special education and health needs, teachers and the running of the school.
- ✓ Over 95 per cent of school leaders said that TAs add value to schools, in particular, in the team around the child; as effective mediators and advocates; with vulnerable pupils and in enhancing the learning environment with all pupils.

Details of responses

1. In what capacity do school leaders employ TAs?

Nearly all respondents said that they employ TAs to work with individual pupils, small groups and pupils with special needs. Well over half reported that they cover classes and over 40 per cent employ TAs to deliver 'specified work' (teach under supervision); nearly 40 per cent said that they work with teachers in classrooms. Over 33 per cent said that they deliver subject-specific work and nearly 30 per cent reported that TAs carry out Planning, Preparation and Assessments (PPA).

School leaders were asked to detail the ways in which they deploy TAs. The following lists do not reflect the content of any particular job, extent to which these duties are performed, or in what combination. Rather, they are intended to be illustrative of the range of TA activity in schools.

1.1. Administration and teacher support:

- Supporting teachers with admin, preparation, displays and classroom management;
- IT technical support;
- Running clubs; before and after school support sessions;
- Exam invigilation;
- Lunchtime behaviour support, supervision;
- Playground duty.

1.2. Supporting teaching:

- Covering teachers' PPA time – *"Every teacher has their own TA for support and also to cover PPA for one hour a week. This is planned by the teacher, however the TA can adapt the lessons to suit needs or own skills"*;
- Small group delivery of GCSE subjects;
- Delivering English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL);
- Behaviour management;
- Philosophy for Children approach throughout school;
- Delivery of targeted interventions and learning support; including Reading Intervention, Spelling Programme, Maths Recovery, Rapid Reading, Sound Discovery;
- *"Invaluable for working on specific IEPs"* (Individual Education Plans).

1.3. Supporting pupils:

- Adapting resources for visually impaired students;
- Supporting students with physical disabilities;
- Common Assessment Framework (CAF) leads; engaging with parents and outside agencies;
- Carrying out SEN reviews;
- Pastoral support; mentoring; well-being;
- Personal care;
- Supporting complex health needs; record-keeping; monitoring medical lists and first-aiders.

This list is not exhaustive. Other roles emerged in subsequent questions.

2. Are TAs employed at different levels?

School leaders were asked whether they employ TAs at level 1, 2, 3 or 4 and to indicate if they use higher levels. The findings do not relate to actual pay rates, but are an indication of whether schools employ TAs with differing responsibilities and which levels are most commonly used. The results were:

Level 1: 34.1%; **Level 2:** 62.2%; **Level 3:** 72.4%; **Level 4:** 43.2%; **Level 5:** 28.6%

Some leaders reported employing TAs at level 6 and one said that they employed them at level 8. A few differentiated HLTAs and qualified nursery nurses from TAs, grading them higher. Some TAs were subject specialists and others had advanced roles such as Associate SENCO or Behaviour Manager. One leader said that level 1 was reserved for apprentices, another that grades were awarded on the basis of qualifications. Additional comments revealed a variety of locally-devised grading approaches, but the fact that only 25 respondents skipped the question and only two were confused by it, suggests widespread understanding and use of a ranking system for TA jobs. The number of levels reportedly in use by respondents was:

Level 1: (7); **Level 2:** (76); **Level 3:** (64); **Level 4:** (20); **Level 5:** (13); **Level 6:** (2); **Level 8:** (1).*

The number of levels does not reflect the grading system in play as leaders employing two levels of TA, for example, may use levels in different permutations e.g. 1 and 2; 2 and 3; 3 and 4; 4 and 5 or 2 and 4; 3 and 5 and so on.

*The figure in brackets represents the number of responses.

3. Do leaders employ HLTAs and in what roles?

3.1. Teaching

The majority of respondents (54 per cent) employ HLTAs in a variety of roles and some employ what they call 'Senior TAs', 'Principal TAs', 'Advanced TAs' or 'Assistant TAs'. One leader said that they had a HLTA deputising for the class teacher in each of their 20 classes. Responses indicated a significant teaching role, primarily:

- Cover for teachers' PPA time and other absences;
- Working with teachers in the classroom;
- One to one or small group teaching.

A leader commented that:

"Teachers had said that they prefer their classes to be covered by the HLTA as they know the children, and the children respond to them in the same way they respond to the class teachers". Another said HLTAs could assist in moments of crisis unlike external supply, as they understood the school ethos and policy.

One respondent said that their HLTA is supported in the classroom by a TA and another that they have their own PPA time. One leader said that they plan, teach and assess in some subjects and others reported that they teach Maths and English (including English as an Additional Language) to

target groups; specific Maths programmes and synthetic phonics. Help with literacy was given in small groups, as well as support to those pupils taking entry level exams and Asdan Cope (personal effectiveness) qualifications. One leader said that their HLTAs were Team-Teach tutors and another that they teach intervention programmes to others.

Among the 46 per cent of respondents who do not use HLTAs to teach, there were a few vehement comments that it was threatening to standards to interchange HLTAs (or TAs) with teachers or to deploy them with the most challenging pupils.

3.2. Special Education Needs

HLTAs appear to play a major role in intervention and inclusion programmes and Special Education. One leader reported that their HLTA was leader of the inclusion unit, leader of the student support centre and assisted with the alternative curriculum. Several respondents said that a HLTA was the 'associate' or co-SENCO and one said that they were their Special Needs lead professional. In other responses, HLTAs help to assess pupils with SEN; one HLTA was the Child and Mental Health Services (CMHS) worker, while others dealt with transition programmes and Children in Care. One respondent said that their HLTA did the SEN and child protection paperwork, another that they deal with exam access arrangements.

3.3. Supporting children and parents

There were various reports of HLTA involvement in inclusion teams; report preparation and liaison with parents and outside agencies, as well as behaviour management. One leader described a HLTA as a learning mentor, student mentor and parent support worker. Another was the family liaison manager. One respondent said that they were pastoral heads, academic heads of year; in charge of flexible learning and extended work placements.

3.4. Management

One leader reported that their HLTA is a member of their senior leadership team and responsible for support staff. Other responses confirm that HLTAs perform management tasks and may line-manage TAs or LSAs; carrying out appraisals and performance management reviews. One respondent described HLTAs as "exemplars for TA development" and some said that they were responsible for TA training. Another leader reported that they do outreach work with TAs in mainstream partner schools. One respondent said that their two HLTAs ran the learning support unit and KS4 behaviour support unit, respectively. Another was said to manage the cover timetabling, while one was the work experience co-ordinator.

3.4. Flexibility

HLTAs are not part of a regulated profession like teachers and are deployed by school leaders in a variety of flexible and strategic ways. One leader said that although they shared core functions, each of their five HLTAs had a different focus within the school: two were on the inclusion team; one had a well-being focus and worked as the headteacher's PA; the fourth supported modern foreign language classes; and the fifth had a literacy focus and ran the library. One leader said that HLTAs work on

whole school projects, like the ECO award; others that they provide leadership in the Healthy Eating Initiative; co-ordinate the School Parliament and deal with additional work such as communications and events organisation. One leader described HLTAs as: *"multi function professionals working with groups and individual students; leading extended curriculum areas e.g. Forest schools, outdoor ed, line managing lower grade TAs"*.

4. Do TAs and teachers work as a team?

Nearly 85 per cent of respondents said that TAs and teachers review the progress of pupils together; nearly 90 per cent engage in joint training and over 50 per cent prepare lessons and plan together. One leader said that this gave recognition to the TAs contribution in the school and another said that TAs know the children very well and liaise with the teacher on issues that they think are affecting their learning; this had a *"very positive effect on achievement"*. One respondent said that they had recently planned joint PPA time for teachers and TAs, while others said that they should or did when time allowed. Some leaders reported that teachers and TAs met to plan intervention strategies for underachieving pupils; tracking and monitoring progress of individuals and groups, for example, those with SEN, weaker readers and *"those supported by pupil premium"*.

A leader reported fortnightly line management meetings of TAs in pairs, with the inclusion co-ordinator (INCO), while another said that the TAs supported focus groups and feedback to the teachers on learning. One leader said that they had *"engaged conversations at the start of every lesson"*; another that shortage of time was an issue. A respondent reported that TAs attended annual reviews and parents' evenings; another that they contribute to personalised planning, but not planning of the curriculum. Another suggested that teachers and TAs function as separate groups.

5. On a scale of 1 – 10, how important were TAs considered?

More than half of the respondents rated their TAs at maximum value, and over 75 per cent said that they were between 8 and 10. The total average was over 8.

6. What did leaders particularly value about TA staff?

Almost 100 per cent of school leaders said that they value the TAs' relationship with pupils and nearly 73 per cent reported appreciating their flexibility. Nearly 70 per cent of respondents value their attitude and over 45 per cent said their relationship with parents. There were 55 additional comments that reported valuing the following in TAs:

6.1. Skills:

- Good observational and intuitive skills;
- Ability to support attainment/impact on learning/closing the gap between pupils;
- Skills/expertise/competence;
- Measurable impact;
- Allowing more curriculum choice to students;
- Skills/abilities of a different nature: pastoral care/mentoring/small group teaching.

6.2. Particular contribution:

- Provision of continuity and consistency across transition points and classes;
- Creativity and clarity in planning for a wide variety of needs;
- Ability to run interventions and report back;
- Local knowledge of the area;
- Excellent value for money.

6.3. Support of the most vulnerable pupils:

- Successful engagement with the most vulnerable;
- Specialist knowledge of SEN needs of pupils;
- Visual impairment expertise;
- Interpreting for children and parents;
- Ability to give time to children who need it.

6.4. Personal qualities:

- Focus and professionalism;
- Dedication/commitment/desire to constantly improve and develop;
- Cheerful/supportive/kind/helpful/loyal/hardworking/reliable/goodwill;
- Work well with teachers and all staff;
- Love children and enjoy working with them.

7. How do leaders assess the effectiveness of TAs?

7.1 Performance management – from formal to intuitive processes

Responses on assessment of TA effectiveness suggested that methods range from formal performance management, much like teachers, to subjective judgement based on the progress of the pupil, group or class, although sometimes with targets. Reports suggest reliance on feedback from teachers, parents, pupils, outside agencies and in one case, a SEN link governor. Some used surveys and staff and student questionnaires. One leader admitted that it *“has been very subjective up until the present”*, another that *“when they are not there, we see a marked difference”*. One leader assessed TAs by *“the reduced levels of anxiety amongst teaching staff”*.

7.2. Assessment practices

Respondents reported using a variety of assessment practices: lesson observation; sometimes with PM targets; peer review; self-evaluation; review of interventions after every lesson or consideration of Ofsted feedback. One leader said that TA planning, recording and assessments were monitored and externally moderated annually. Another spoke of ‘school teaching and learning audits’ and looking at pupils’ books that are marked by TAs; one leader said that they monitored any units written by HLTAs. In another, TAs had performance reviews, were part of a planned lesson observation cycle

and had regular progress meetings during a six-month probationary period. Several respondents spoke of mapping baseline against progress data for intervention groups, or the *“tracking of student progress ...to show how a specific intervention delivered by a TA has impacted on students”*. One assessed pupil well-being, while another respondent established accountability through team action planning. In one school, TAs had HLTA targets and HLTAs had teaching targets in a continuous improvement process.

7.3 Line management processes

Some leaders referred to line management procedures: the use of staff appraisal, mentoring and departmental reviews, with one conducting one-to-ones with TAs every term and using an appraisal system. Another measured TAs against the national occupational standards and one leader reported using the National Association of Professional Teaching Assistants' profiles. A few respondents referred to training, continuous professional development (CPD) and skills audit as part of the performance review process.

8. What do leaders think are the barriers that inhibit the best deployment of TAs?

Of the 176 responses to this question, only 11 said that they did not experience barriers in TA employment. There were common themes in the replies, many of which focused on the lack of time for teachers and TAs to work together and the knowledge of how to do so effectively. This question was open-ended to avoid priming leaders by supplying given barriers. The most frequently cited barriers were funding-related, followed by training and development and then a range of deployment practice issues. The following lists report specific barriers that were identified:

8.1. Funding:

Respondents frequently identified funding as a barrier to effective deployment with the following comments:

- Never enough money to employ enough TAs;
- Hours allocated by the LA to support pupils with statements bear no relation to actual cost;
- No money for training and development;
- No funding to allow for progression.

8.2. Training and development:

Training issues were also frequently referred to as a barrier:

- Skills set/qualifications deficit;
- Range of TA attainment from no qualifications to graduate;
- Poor induction and lack of CPD;
- ICT skills shortage;
- No understanding of whole school vision;
- Absence of focused training;
- Need for subject knowledge/understanding of curriculum area assessment;

- Need for knowledge of whole class delivery and how to foster:
 - high level questioning skills;
 - challenge to limiting beliefs,
 - pupil independence,
 - school culture.
- Poor confidence, sometimes in their own literacy skills;
- English and Maths deficit to support older children effectively;
- Low aspirations and self-esteem;
- Individual attitudes/professionalism;
- Teachers' need of TA management training;
- Need for joined up teacher/TA training events.

8.3. TA deployment practice

There were comments about difficulties in working practices:

8.3.1. Working with teachers:

- Attitude of colleagues;
- How teachers use/lead them;
- Overdependence of teachers on TAs;
- Less effective in classroom with teacher than on own;
- Different teachers expecting different things;
- Teachers not wanting LSAs in the classroom;
- Deference of TAs towards teachers;
- Lack of time for liaison with teachers;
- Newly qualified teachers directing experienced TAs;
- Need to reduce 'dead time' listening to teacher in class;
- Assumption of teaching role.

8.3.2. Job demands:

- Overuse of TAs with behaviour management;
- Dependent on particular needs of the pupil (esp. "high tariff");
- Need for TAs and in what role, varies with intake;
- 'Rarely cover' regulations;
- Complex timetables;
- Class size.

8.3.3. Management:

- Excluded from team planning sessions;
- Lack of space/facilities to work away from the class;

- Not taking their wishes into account;
- Not seeking their views;
- Communication;
- Lack of freedom to use skills.

8.3.4. Other:

- Bad publicity;
- Hierarchy;
- Too much union negativity;
- Inflexibility.

8.4. Pay and conditions of service

References to the limits set by poor pay and conditions were as follows:

- Low pay and poor conditions;
- Pay freezes;
- Lack of competitive pay rates;
- No scope for retention/promotion;
- Lack of enough paid hours;
- Dependence on goodwill;
- Limitation of job descriptions;
- Lack of career structure;
- Sickness absence.

One respondent said that poor pay made it difficult to retain young staff, especially males. Another said that their authority was not paying TAs in the holidays, had cut pay and no longer paid the first two days of sick leave. This had had a *“terrible impact on staff morale”* and in those circumstances, the leader felt less able to hold TAs accountable for good standards.

9. What effect would the loss of TAs from the school workforce have?

This was also an open question in which no options were offered. The following lists of replies have been grouped under three common themes which emerged:

9.1. Impact on children with special education and health needs:

- Pupils with statements would fail to survive in mainstream education;
- Most challenging pupils and those with severe learning difficulties would suffer;
- Vulnerable pupils would lose their ‘safe’ locations;
- Mainstreaming would have to halt and the number of special schools would have to increase;
- There would be unmet health needs;
- Classes would be disrupted as many children have anti-social problems;
- Loss of intervention strategies;
- Lower pupil attainment.

9.2. Impact on teachers:

- More teachers would have to be recruited;
- Additional workload and stress for teachers;
- Higher teacher sick leave;
- *"Teachers would need to change their teaching styles and the learning opportunities"*;
- Teachers would need training in special needs.

9.3. Impact on running of the school:

- Narrowing of curriculum;
- Cover implications;
- More health and safety issues;
- Reduced access to harder-to-reach parents;
- Reduction of wider and extra curricula provision/residential;
- No displays;
- Reduced adult/student contact;
- *"My school would n't be outstanding"*;
- Standards would fall;
- *"We could not function"*;
- Pupil absenteeism would increase as some TAs mentor those most likely to be absent on a daily basis;
- Other staff would inevitably have to be recruited.

10. Did leaders think that TAs add value and in what way?

There were a few emphatic comments that TAs do not add value and some said that they do when professional staff; deployed appropriately. Over 95 per cent confirmed that TAs add value to learning in the ways that have been grouped as follows:

10.1. In the team around the child:

- *"My TAs definitely add value because I have invested in their training and they are part of a strong team"*;
- *"We employ in excess of 100 TAs. They are crucial to the smooth running of the school and are critical partners in the education of our children"*;
- Interventions in small groups/expertise in specific programmes;
- *"Incisive alternative observation and feedback on pupil progress"*;
- TA takes the time to *"really get to know what makes a child tick"*;

10.2. Effective mediators and advocates:

- Effective mediation with pupils and staff/easier to talk to than teachers;
- Build trust relationships quicker and act as advocates for pupils and parents;
- Increase personalisation/ important role in children's emotional development.

10.3. Role with vulnerable pupils:

- *“Give reassurance and one-to-one attention and support to the pupils with the lowest confidence and self-esteem, plus advice and organisational support”;*
- Provide pastoral care and act as positive role models for pupils with gaps in their family structure;
- Increase confidence to work independently before post-16 choices;
- Support SEN and other vulnerable pupils to learn alongside their peers;
- Provide additional adult time for pupils and *“put across learning in a different way which helps some children”;*
- *“Definitely in a special school. They have a different relationship with pupils and are able to give ‘whole child’ support as well as being a stable liaison with parents”;*
- Valued part of the assessment of children;
- In a secondary, TAs becomes expert in a pupil’s complex needs to advise different subject teachers;
- Provide intimate care and medical support.

10.4. Enhancing the learning environment for all pupils:

- Help reduce disruption in class and number of exclusions;
- Recent TAs have *“single-handedly kept some of our year 11s from pre-exclusion and helped them achieve 5 A* to C grade GCSEs”;*
- Prevent escalation of poor behaviour and support reintegration into the classroom;
- Help reduce class sizes by delivering the curriculum to lower ability groups;
- Cover classes;
- General TAs free teachers from admin tasks;
- Help achieve a ‘readiness for learning’;
- Teacher and TA rotate small group working;
- Focus on the more able learners, freeing teacher to work with lower ability groups or Gifted and Talented;
- Teach alternative curriculum which would not be possible without them;
- Versatility: *“who else do the government think will mix the paints, set up the room, peel four year olds off their mother, deliver catch up literacy and numeracy programmes, work with SEN children on IEPs...”;*
- Provide flexible support in an environment of ever-changing needs;
- *“Our impact data demonstrates TA interventions close the gap effectively on age-related expectations”;*
- *“Exceptional value for money”.*

11. Additional comments

School leaders were invited to provide additional comments and many took the opportunity to reiterate points about which they felt strongly.

11.1. Impact of TAs in schools

There were some additional comments that expressed the challenge in measuring the way in which TAs enhance learning, for example, when working with autistic children on relating to others. Some felt that the measurement of TA effectiveness should be broader; or that assessment should be of the whole school team achievement. The type of school was an inevitable factor, with one leader saying that *“in a small school where teachers wear many hats already, TAs make the difference between coping and drowning. They are often able to be more flexible than teachers and can give pupils more of their time”*. Another felt that *“many pairs of hands, many well-trained adults who can engage sensitively and creatively with each individual child, people who are excellent team players. Our TAs are all these things and more and we could not work without them.”* One respondent claimed that TAs had a significant impact on the attainment of SEN and disabled pupils, delivering tailored programmes for weaker readers and mentoring at key stage 4. They had successfully supported progress with children on free school meals which had been a school target. Another leader suggested that their TAs reflected the different ethnic groups that make up their school, thereby supporting community cohesion.

There were a few views on whether TAs should teach or provide pastoral care only. One leader said that TAs do not need to replace teachers but are needed to *“provide care and welfare of the pupils and emotional support together with encouraging and supporting the pupils’ learning and progress”*. Another said that TAs should only work with pupils under the direction and supervision of a qualified teacher. One respondent said that LSAs added little to learning, unless there was a narrow focus and deployment played to their personal strengths; another felt that some pupils had become reliant on TA “spoon-feeding”. One said that ‘faculty assistants’ had a greater impact than TAs or LSAs. One leader said that they would now only be employing LSAs to support Early Years children, having judged their support to be ineffective with older pupils.

One leader concluded that, *“staff who are more highly educated and well-trained have a huge impact when delivering highly structured programmes, but staff with poor communication, literacy and numeracy skills, have little impact. Using staff to babysit pupils covers up poor teaching which should address issues such as inclusion and behaviour”*.

Another stated that: *“The creative use of TAs over the last 10 years has been the single biggest factor in the improvement of student attainment at my school”*.

11.2. TAs in the context of government policy

There was a general conclusion that there was no choice about employing TAs, because of various government policies: inclusion; mainstreaming; remodelling of the workforce; PPA and ‘rarely cover’ regulations for teachers. On the inclusion agenda, one leader said that without TAs, the teaching workforce would need to dramatically increase or these students would drop out and certainly not reach their potential. There was a comment that government seems increasingly hostile towards deliverers of education, relying on commissioned research rather than responding to *“objective and chalk-face evidence to form truly improving policy”*. One leader felt that the government had no interest in the opinions of headteachers and another that schools are a political football and that TAs were brought in to save money and were now in question when schools cannot do without them.

11.3. Suggestions for improved deployment of TAs

One respondent felt that schools were now looking at a more robust use of TAs, as teachers had become too reliant on using them to manage poor behaviour; a comment echoed by other respondents. Another commented that in special schools, TAs historically had a care background, but the role had changed and so there was a need for retraining and a look at acceptable qualifications; but finding the right training was a “minefield”. Others agreed that impact on learning comes hand in hand with training, to maintain a professional environment. One leader said that there is need for a better defined career progression, while another said that they would welcome good practice examples of TA deployment. Various respondents suggested that TAs are only as good as the use that is made of them and that practice varies between schools. One leader suggested that effectiveness depended on how a leader structured the team and that team leaders should support newer TAs. Another said that, *“it is the responsibility of the schools to employ the right calibre of staff and to offer CPD as appropriate to continuously develop them”*; a view echoed by several respondents. One leader warned that, *“Unless their roles are seen as a vocational career with a structure and pay scales to match their level of responsibility, they will continue to attract job seekers who do not necessarily possess the skills and education required”*.

Some employ TAs with a view to their progression to teaching and one said that, *“many TAs in our school have developed to become teachers, take specialist degrees and have raised aspirations in the local community.ie. the school has become the hub for parents to develop career aspirations”*. Another said that, *“we appoint high achieving graduates who see TA work as valuable experience and a step towards a career in teaching”*. Yet another said that *“In our school at least two TAs start their degree every year. The interview process has this potential in mind. Post appointment we consider: progress of students, performance management, classroom observations, feedback from staff, feedback from students, feedback from parents”*. One respondent said that *“a high quality recruitment process can unquestionably produce an excellent support staff team...but inadequate training opportunities lead to TAs having no prior embedded professional standards, leaving schools unable to guarantee that all TAs will work consistently and reliably”*. Some were developing subject specialism for TAs or allowing them more freedom with accountability. One leader reported that when interviewing TAs they saw it as important that they could lead a group in a learning activity, much like a teacher and commented: *“I do not employ them just to fill a need because it is another body in the classroom”*. Another said that while they were now recruiting graduates to TA posts, some of the older more experienced TAs performed most effectively. One leader suggested that *“perhaps it is time to revisit the tasks and role they are meant to fulfil on a national basis, and put in place a national framework so there is consistency”*.

12. Concluding comments

The rapid rise in the employment of TAs in schools has not been a spontaneous phenomenon that can be reversed. It is necessary to understand that their recruitment has resulted from changes in education policy and the introduction of regulations that have expanded TA roles and numbers. An important question to be asked is how can TAs be deployed consistently, fairly and transparently to the benefit of teaching, learning and the running of schools. What is clear from the findings of this survey is that attitudes based on a TA stereotype, with uniform duties and practice, ignore the complexity of their twenty-first century roles, local choices on how they are deployed and school differences. There is no blueprint and deployment practice is something of a lottery, perpetuated by the absence of a resourced national framework, covering job profiles and guidance, pay and conditions of service; training and career progression. Some schools have a clear vision of how they can use TAs to best advantage and are investing in them to achieve that; others have not. All would benefit, not least TAs themselves, from resources and support from employers, the Teaching Agency and the Department for Education. Realising the potential of children and young people must go hand in hand with realising the potential of TAs.

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