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for Education

Use of teaching assistants in schools

Research report

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Authors: CFE Research



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This research report was written before the new UK Government took office on 5 July 2024. As a result, the content may not reflect current Government policy.

1 Summary

This report is based on insight from two nationally representative surveys, with teaching assistants (TAs) and school leaders, commissioned by DfE and qualitative research with 63 TAs, 41 teachers and 34 leaders. The purpose of the research was to examine the reasons schools use TAs, the roles they fulfil, the barriers and enablers to the effective use of TAs, and their perceived impact on pupil outcomes in different school phases and settings across England.

The findings indicate the roles and responsibilities of TAs have increased significantly in recent years. TAs perform a variety of tasks to support teaching and learning in addition to what might be thought of as traditional activities, such as maintaining classroom space and preparing resources. This frequently includes whole class, one-to-one and small group support delivered both in and outside of the classroom to pupils with identified needs. This is most commonly pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), which includes those with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans, but also includes a wide variety of other pupils. For many TAs, their roles and responsibilities extend beyond supporting pupil learning and include pastoral and non-classroom activities such as administration and pre-school, break and lunchtime duties as leaders seek to fully utilise the capacity and expertise that they offer.

That said, significant variation in what tasks TAs are expected to perform as part of their role (and therefore whether they are paid extra money for these additional tasks) is evident both across and within settings as responsibilities evolve in response to the individual needs of schools. Job descriptions differ, exacerbated by multiple people being involved in the management and monitoring of TAs in larger schools, especially secondaries. Only a minority of teachers report that they have received any training about how to deploy TAs effectively in the classroom, leaving them to independently navigate the demarcation of teacher and TA responsibilities.

Leaders, TAs and teachers reported that the increased role of TAs is largely driven by the changing characteristics of the pupils they support. They describe a rise in the number of pupils with SEND in mainstream settings as well as the increased social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs of pupils further to the COVID-19 pandemic more broadly.

As a result of the variety of roles that TAs perform, they are highly valued by leaders and teachers who report significant positive impacts at the pupil, teacher and school level. The view that TAs are essential to the classroom is particularly strong in primary schools.

Yet despite this, leaders report that budget pressures increasingly restrict the number of TAs that schools can appoint, with a third of primary schools looking to reduce the number despite their significance in the classroom. Whilst schools use various funding streams, the increasing number of pupils with SEND is challenging most leaders. Schools report that the additional high needs top-up funding associated with EHC plans, which the authority allocates to the school, does not meet the full costs of the TAs schools feel they need to support these pupils. This requires schools to meet some costs from their existing budgets.¹

Plans to appoint TAs are affected by recruitment challenges, with prospective TAs lacking some of the skills desired by leaders such as skills for supporting pupils with SEND, phonics and maths. 'Soft' skills are prioritised by leaders as specific skills can be learned on the job, which can bring added value in terms of a diverse range of skills and backgrounds. Interest in learning is highest among those TAs new to the role as they are keen to develop – but leaders said they face challenges sourcing and paying for training. Professional development is typically restricted to free courses meaning hugely variable access and some leaders and TAs note there are limited opportunities for career progression. Those more experienced in the role are less interested in pursuing opportunities for professional development as they perceive that there are limited opportunities for progression both in terms of role and pay.

Whilst most TAs are satisfied in their role, pay and opportunities for progression are significant issues. Most schools use the National Joint Council's terms and conditions for TAs. The majority of leaders interviewed think these do not reflect the variety and breadth of responsibilities TAs now hold, nor recognise the value of the most highly skilled and knowledgeable TAs. Some leaders report that they are not able to pay TAs at a rate that is more commensurate with their role and responsibilities because of budget pressures. Leaders also express concern that this may lead to issues with retention in the future, as they perceive that TAs remain in the role despite their pay, motivated by altruistic and/or personal reasons, and the commitment of TAs can often be taken for granted.

¹ Some EHC plans will specify TA time, or provision to be led by TAs, in Section F of the plan. The LA is responsible for securing this provision in law (usually by providing additional high needs funding to schools), taking account that additional support costs up to £6,000 per pupil per annum which is expected to be met from the school's notional SEN budget.

2 Executive summary of main findings

This report draws on insight from a YouGov survey commissioned by DfE and qualitative research with teaching assistants (TAs), teachers and leaders undertaken by CFE Research to examine the use and value of TAs in different school settings across England.

Research aims and approach

DfE commissioned YouGov to conduct nationally representative surveys with TAs and school leaders. The aim was to better understand how TAs are deployed in different school phases and settings and the impact they have on pupil outcomes. A total of 2,715 TAs and 1,296 school leaders responded to the surveys which were administered in May and June 2023.

CFE was subsequently commissioned to undertake large scale qualitative research with a sample of survey respondents and teachers. The aim was to add depth to the survey findings by exploring the motivations and experiences of TAs and capturing insights into the reasons schools use TAs, the roles they fulfil within different contexts, the barriers and enablers to the effective use of TAs, and their perceived impact on pupils' outcomes. Between July and December 2023, 63 TAs and 34 school leaders were interviewed, and 41 teachers participated in six phase-specific focus groups.

Key findings

How TAs are deployed

Most TAs and leaders believe the **roles and responsibilities of TAs have increased significantly** in recent years. As well as what are considered the traditional activities of maintaining classroom spaces and preparing resources, TAs now perform a greater variety of tasks to support teaching and learning. TAs often work alongside teachers to provide support while pupils master new concepts, address barriers to engagement in lessons, and build pupil confidence. These roles and responsibilities extend beyond supporting pupil learning for many and include pastoral and non-classroom activities such as administration and pre-school, break and lunchtime duties. Interviewees state this increase has been driven by several factors, including the demands of the curriculum and legislative processes such as safeguarding and the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), and difficulties in teacher recruitment and workloads which leads to some tasks falling to suitably qualified TAs in some instances. The characteristics of the pupils that TAs support have changed over recent years due to a number of factors, including an increase in the number of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), the legacy of the pandemic on young people's mental health and

learning loss, and the cost-of-living crisis. These changes have also had a significant impact on the tasks TAs are expected to perform. In addition, some leaders report that the role and responsibilities of TAs also evolves organically, as schools seek to harness the previous skills and experiences of the TAs they appoint.

There is also **wide variation in the tasks performed by TAs**, with notable differences by setting. Roles and responsibilities are determined by the individual needs of schools, resulting in significant differences in what TAs are expected to undertake as a core part of their role. Some TAs perform additional tasks, such as lunchtime duties, as part of their TA role while others undertake this as a separate paid role. Leaders acknowledge that school expectations vary. Some suggest that more consistent job descriptions and guidance are necessary to help facilitate a standardised approach and ensure TAs are remunerated in accordance with both the roles they perform and the skills, experience and qualifications they bring to the post. Only a small minority of teachers say they receive training delivered either internally by colleagues or externally by providers about how to deploy TAs effectively in the classroom. This leaves teachers to navigate these complexities and determine the demarcation of teacher and TA responsibilities.

TAs across all school settings most commonly support pupils with **SEND**, which includes those with **Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans**. However, the way this is performed differs depending on the setting. A TA is typically **allocated to each class in primary schools**, alongside dedicated one-to-one support delivered by an additional TA where stipulated in an EHC plan. TAs are responsible for providing whole class teaching and learning support and the delivery of one-to-one and small group interventions both in and outside the classroom to identified children. This often includes literacy interventions and phonics and, to a lesser extent, maths. TAs in special schools appear to deliver a **similar role**, the main distinction being that there are often a greater number of TAs delivering whole class support due to the needs of pupils. Across both primary and special schools, there is a strong preference to keep pupils in the classroom for group work to remove the potential stigma of the intervention although there is recognition that work outside the classroom is sometimes necessary. This include phonics where pupils are required to speak different sounds which can be challenging in a busy classroom environment.

Secondary schools differ. Whole class support is less common in secondary schools where TAs are more often deployed to **support small groups or pupils on a one-to-one basis**. This may be as part of lessons or in a learning support hub away from the classroom. Some TAs have experience in the underlying educational, health and social needs of the pupils they support whilst others have subject-specific knowledge and perform more selective tasks. TAs in secondary schools are more likely to hold a degree-level qualification when compared to those in primary and special schools.

Irrespective of school setting, leaders and teachers express **concerns about the 'velcro' model** where a TA is constantly with a pupil. In line with the Education

Endowment Foundation's (EEF) guidance about helping pupils develop independent learning skills², leaders prefer a 'helicopter' approach that prepares a child for independent learning. This involves a TA starting a child off on an activity but then working with others before returning to help with any problems, reassure and refocus. Even where TAs are assigned to work on a one-to-one basis as part of an EHC plan, leaders say they seek to avoid assigning a single TA to a pupil and encourage TAs to work more broadly when the pupil they support can work independently on a task.

The **quality of the relationship** between teachers and TAs is seen as critical, with effective deployment occurring when there is clarity about roles and responsibilities, strong verbal and non-verbal communication, and the ability to work collaboratively to deliver lessons. However, the boundary between the teacher and TA depends on the individuals involved and is often determined by the experience they both have in their role.

Recruitment and retention

Half of all secondary and special schools plan to increase the number of TAs they employ whilst a third of primary schools are looking to reduce the number. Nearly every leader planning to decrease the number of TAs in their school cited financial pressures. Those increasing TA numbers overwhelmingly indicate that this is as a result of the **increase in the number of pupils with SEND** in their schools, particularly those with an existing EHC plan or going through the assessment process due to a presenting need. Leaders, teachers and TAs believe that TAs are increasingly playing an important role in supporting the social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs of pupils. Interviewees report that, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, pupils enter primary school with speech and language needs whilst older pupils experience mental health issues. Whilst growing class sizes were discussed in the interviews, this was mentioned in relation to a simultaneous increase in the number of pupils with SEND. Leaders and teachers strongly maintain that teachers cannot effectively meet the needs of a growing number of pupils with SEND alongside those of other pupils in the class. Schools emphasise that the behavioural needs of some pupils with SEND are significant and can require more than one teaching professional in the classroom to enable the teacher to focus on meeting the needs of all learners.

Whilst various funding streams are used for TAs, interviewees report that **budget pressures increasingly restrict the number of TAs that schools can appoint**. Leaders reference the impact of the increasing number of pupils with SEND on school budgets as those with EHC plans do not attract additional funding to meet the full cost of the TAs required to support pupils, meaning schools meet the shortfall from their existing budgets. Leaders seek to draw upon wider funding, including employing TA apprentices

² Education Endowment Foundation (2021). Making best use of teaching assistants. Guidance Report. London: EEF

by using the Apprenticeship Levy. However, some state that there is a lack of awareness about the Levy and the administration can be complex.

Although some leaders plan to increase the number of TAs, they also report that **recruitment is challenging**, especially in secondary schools. Leaders report that some prospective TAs lack the desired level of skills, citing gaps in relation to skills for working with pupils with SEND and in specific areas such as phonics, maths and literacy. Confronted with skills gaps, leaders **prioritise personal attributes and soft skills**, such as resilience and flexibility, as specific skills can be learned on the job through training. This typically results in the employment of non-specialist TAs who develop classroom experience and specific skills whilst employed. Most TAs are **interested in opportunities for training**, with interest highest amongst those with less experience in the role. That said, leaders outline the challenges they face when sourcing and paying for training and professional development, with tight budgets restricting opportunities. Some leaders circumvent these barriers by identifying sources of free training on a range of relevant topics.

Leaders are quick to highlight that they would miss out on some exceptional TAs if they narrowly focussed on skills and qualifications. TAs have a wealth of experience in both **education and non-education** contexts, applying for TA positions because of the opportunities they present to work with children and young people and accommodate any parental and family responsibilities around the role. They can bring transferable skills from sectors including adult care and nursing, administration and professional roles outside of teaching including policing.

Some secure a TA role as a route into teaching, deciding to use it as an opportunity to gain valuable classroom experience. One-in-five survey respondents reported that they were 'extremely' or 'very' interested in undertaking training to become a qualified teacher. However, most TAs **do not wish to become teachers**. There are also a small number of former teachers who work as TAs because they can achieve a better work-life balance compared to a professional teaching role. This brings significant benefits to schools, with leaders highlighting the added value that comes from having two individuals that can apply pedagogical or teaching knowledge in a classroom. Primary leaders particularly value this for short-term cover teaching.

Leaders report that once TAs are in post, **retention is less problematic than recruitment**. TAs are **broadly satisfied** in their role despite reporting dissatisfaction with the opportunities to progress. TAs describe remaining in the job despite their pay, gaining satisfaction from having a direct impact on children. Some leaders believe that the commitment of TAs can be taken for granted and will eventually impact on retention. Leaders feel they are in a difficult position and have little room for manoeuvre on pay given school budget pressures. Only half of TAs are satisfied with the opportunities to progress. A few TAs question the value of progression given limited pay opportunities.

Most TAs do not consider that the pay and working conditions reflect the importance of their role.

Management of TAs

It is relatively common for **more than one person** to manage different aspects of TA work, especially in larger schools. A leader typically manages the overall deployment of TAs across a school; this is often the head in smaller schools (including primaries) or a member of the senior leadership team (SLT) or special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo) in larger primaries and secondary schools. Day-to-day supervision is undertaken by different individuals depending on the setting. In primary and special schools, teachers typically allocate the work of TAs whereas this is likely to be undertaken by a SENCo, Head of Department or other TA/HLTA in secondary schools. Some TAs and leaders think that the different managers can mean that the support and development needs of TAs can get lost. TAs report that **good communication and openness** are features of good management practices. Most TAs receive performance reviews with feedback informed by a range of sources, including feedback from teachers and pupil progress data. However, the methods adopted vary and can be linked to the preferences of the SLT.

The impact of TAs

As a result of the variety of roles and responsibilities that TAs perform, interviewees perceive that they deliver significant impacts at the pupil, teacher and school level. The positive impacts of TAs in terms of **improving pupil behaviour and engagement in the classroom and improving academic progress** are universally recognised by leaders irrespective of school setting. Some teachers and TAs believe that developing strong relationships with pupils can help address barriers to learning for academic progress to follow. This is perceived as especially important for pupils with SEND that necessitate close relationships. Some school leaders and teachers also reported that the improved behaviour and engagement in the classroom delivered outcomes not only for the pupils directly supported by TAs but also for the wider class. It is perceived that TAs observe behavioural triggers which have the potential to disrupt lessons and intervene before the situation escalates.

Whilst the leader survey highlighted significant impacts in terms of **teacher workload and attendance** – with notable differences by phase – interviewees were more likely to discuss the impact of TAs in terms of pupil engagement and academic progress. Leaders and teachers also highlight how TAs play a vital role in helping teachers manage their increasing workload and assume responsibility for functions that would be undertaken by teachers if they were not in post. This is reflected in the changing responsibilities of TAs.

Leaders and teachers **highly value the support of TAs**, with the view that TAs are essential to the classroom being particularly strong in primary schools. Interviewees

suggest that having more than one teaching professional in the classroom allows teachers and TAs to make their way round all pupils, ensuring that they have understood the concepts being taught. This is seen as especially important for lower attaining pupils or those with SEND.

3 Detailed research findings

This section outlines the purpose of the research and the methods used.

Research aims and objectives

Teaching assistants (TAs) make up approximately three in 10 members of the school workforce and play an important role in schools.³ Since 2011/12, FTE TA numbers have grown from 221,500 to 281,100 in state-schools in England.

There is a body of evidence for TAs, but its strength and quality are inconsistent. Pedagogical evidence, largely from the EEF⁴, shows that TA interventions can be among the most beneficial for pupil attainment, but only when TAs are well trained and properly used. Overall, there is good evidence for how to use TAs effectively, but limited evidence for how schools actually deploy TAs. This research aimed to fill this evidence gap.

The SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan⁵ includes a commitment to develop a longer-term approach for TAs. In support of this, DfE commissioned research to develop its evidence-base on current school approaches, demand and current practices. This comprised an online survey of school leaders and TAs undertaken by YouGov in spring 2023 and follow-up qualitative research by CFE Research in the autumn.

Method

Online survey of leaders and TAs

DfE commissioned YouGov to conduct surveys with TAs and school leaders between April and May 2023. In total, 2,715 TAs and 1,296 leaders responded to the surveys. Random samples of TAs and schools were drawn from the School Workforce Census (SWC). Data was then weighted to be representative of the school workforce using the 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics' and 'Get Information About Schools' databases.

This report summarises key findings from these surveys which are then explored in detail through the qualitative research. These surveys are referred to as the TA survey and leaders survey in the report. We report evidence from surveys in the past tense as it refers to views from the 2022/23 academic year. The survey included a recontact

³ Department for Education (2022). School Workforce in England, Reporting year 2022. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england>.

⁴ Education Endowment Foundation (2021). Making best use of teaching assistants. Guidance Report. London: EEF

⁵ HM Government (2023). Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time.

question which was used as the sample frame for qualitative interviews with both audiences.

Qualitative research with leaders, TAs and teachers

Between September and December 2023, purposive sampling was used to achieve interviews with TAs and leaders as well as focus groups with teachers working in a range of schools. Table 1 summarises the sample distribution of interviews and focus groups by audience and school phase (those working in primary, secondary and special schools).

Table 1: Number of interviews conducted with TAs and leaders by phase

School phase	Teaching assistants	School leaders	Total interviews	Teacher focus groups (participants)
Primary	23	16	39	2 (13)
Secondary	21	8	29	2 (16)
Special	19	10	29	2 (12)
Total	63	34	97	6 (41)

Six 90-minute online focus groups (two for each phase) were held with a total of 41 teachers recruited from a panel of 750 teachers. In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with 63 TAs and 34 leaders who were recruited from the survey; interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. Target quotas were applied by phase for the interviews: 20 per phase for TAs and 10 per phase for school leaders. These were particularly challenging to achieve for:

1. TAs in special schools who accounted for the smallest proportion of the survey recontact sample (24% of the sample); and
2. School leaders in secondary schools as the sample was dominated by those in primary schools (50% of the sample).

In addition, flexible quotas for the interviews with TAs and school leaders were applied to ensure representation of interviews at the aggregate level by English region, schools located in advantaged and disadvantaged areas (based on the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals), and Ofsted ratings.

A discussion guide was used to ensure interviews and focus groups covered specific topics. All methods were transcribed for thematic coding and analysis. Interviews and focus groups were conducted in the autumn term of the 2023/24 academic year and

evidence from these interviews is reported in the present tense to differentiate them from survey evidence.

The following should be considered in relation to the qualitative research findings:

1. The qualitative research was undertaken in the 2023/24 academic year, so a few interviewees were working in a different school compared with when they completed the survey.
2. Anyone who left the school they were at when they completed the YouGov survey and did not provide a personal contact number could not be approached.
3. TAs and teachers were incentivised to participate in the qualitative research. They were offered shopping vouchers to thank them for their participation.⁶

Becoming a teaching assistant

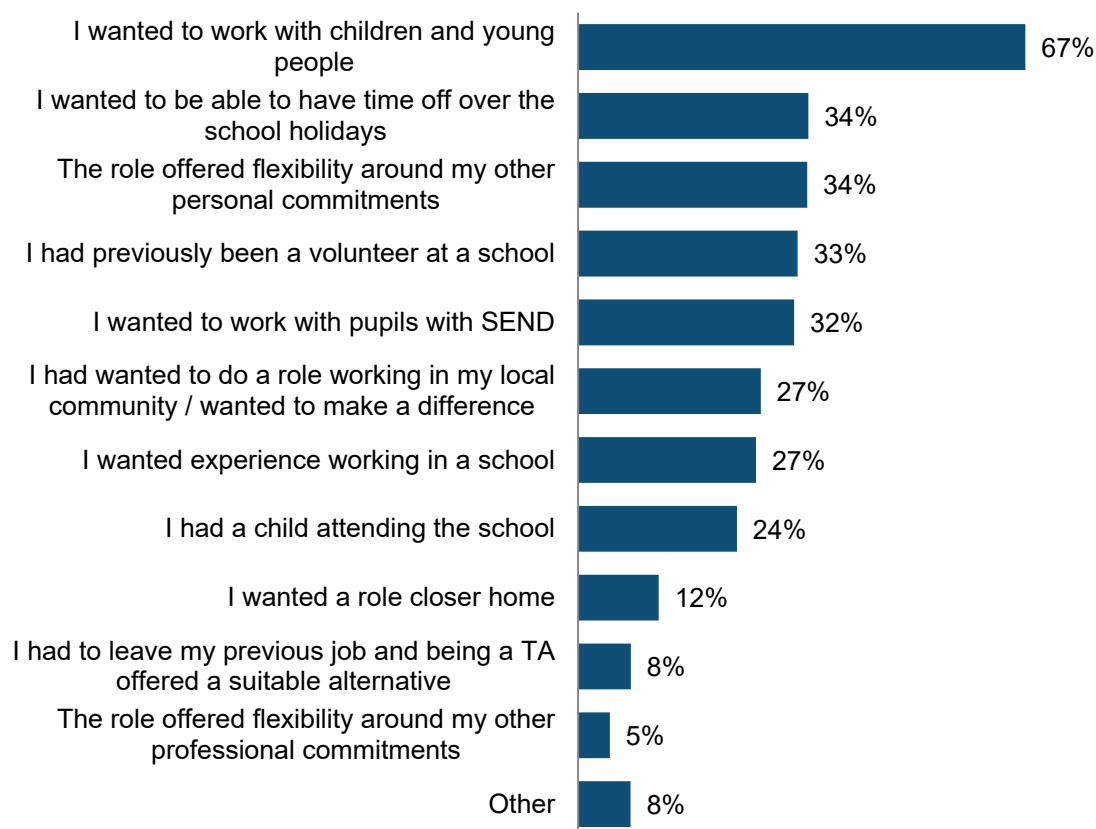
This section considers the reasons why people become TAs, their previous employment and the skills and experience they bring to the role, and academic qualifications.

Motivations and reasons for becoming a TA

The survey findings indicate that motivations for becoming a TA vary considerably and include both professional and personal reasons. The majority (67%) want to work with children and young people. Other professional motivations include a desire to work with pupils with SEND (32%) and gain experience working in a school (27%). Personal motivations feature strongly and centre upon the flexibility and/or convenience afforded by aspects of the role (34%) (Figure 1).

⁶ TAs were offered a £30 voucher for taking part in interviews and teachers who took part in the scheduled focus groups were offered a £60 voucher.

Figure 1: Reasons for becoming a TA



Source: TA survey. Base: 2,715

Working with children and young people

TAs appear highly motivated by the opportunity the TA role affords to make a difference to pupils – both educationally and socially. TAs tend to either have previous experience of working with children or a strong passion or desire to work with this group. Some TAs described previous employment that did not fulfil them and a desire for change.

I went to work at a bank when I was 19 and hated every minute of it. So after I had my first child at 21, I stayed at home with him and loved being with him, and then when he was in playgroups and stuff I loved being with the kids, and my husband just said to me, “Why don't you train to work in a school because it's obviously where you belong.” – TA, *Primary school*

Developing experience in education

Several interviewees discuss the TA role as a planned route into the teaching profession. Some make a conscious decision to use the TA role to develop valuable classroom experience and ensure the classroom environment is for them. A couple of interviewees became teacher trainees between completing the survey in the 2022/23 academic year and the interview in 2023/24. They find their TA experience valuable because it taught

them techniques and skills, including specific skills for supporting pupils with SEND. TAs can also observe teachers' classroom techniques and learn through observation.

We generally find that TAs are coming into the profession earlier and are looking to maybe use that as a step to becoming a teacher in the future. They're quite good at [building relationships] and they've got those relationships. But... you can't really teach the skills of having a relationship with young people, it develops over time. – *Teacher, Secondary school*

A couple of TAs who were qualified teachers completed their initial teacher training (ITT) during the pandemic and had less chance to learn classroom craft due to national lockdowns where most teaching delivery was conducted online. These interviewees say the TA role helps them address some classroom-work skills gaps and improve their confidence for a future teaching post.

The flexibility of the role

Many TAs say being a TA is family friendly and that they can fit parental and family needs around the role. The term-time only feature of many TA contracts also means they can be home with their children during holidays. For long-serving TAs, the role also offers space to develop as their children get older and their time available for work increases. Several TAs mention their responsibilities increased as their children grew up and they became more experienced.

Before that, I was doing some of the reading interventions... Because I did such a good role and I did so well with the progress of the students that I worked with, [they] expanded that role... Now my son's a bit older, I'd like more responsibility. It's worked out well for us both. – *TA, Secondary school*

A few TAs are (or were) parents of children attending a school, and/or volunteered in a role at the school before becoming a TA. Volunteers wanted to help their school in some capacity. Some had time to offer once all their children were in school, others sought work experience in education. These TAs think volunteering is a good way to experience work in a school and develop skills through practical work and related qualifications. Their main motivation to volunteer was to help children in a school and start a role that fit their personal circumstances at the time.

When my youngest was doing her last year at nursery, I needed to prepare myself ready for work for when she went to school. My daughter... was shy and relied on other people and I needed to make her more confident and able to stand on her own two feet. So, I went to a different nursery and asked if they would support me while as a

volunteer, so I could do the [teaching assistant] qualification, and that led to employment. – *TA, Primary school*

Experience before becoming a TA

TAs describe a wide variety of past employment and life experiences, and many leaders creatively apply these skills in their schools. This experience is acquired in a range of sectors, with individuals bringing a variety of transferrable skills to the role.

Experience derived directly from educational roles

Some former teachers working as TAs express concerns about returning to work as a teacher and leaders offer them the opportunity to use their valuable professional skills in a role they enjoy. Former teachers report liking the control they have over their working lives and the improved work-life balance compared to a professional teaching role and are often willing to compromise on pay for a less stressful job. They feel empowered to take on responsibilities at their own pace and help when comfortable to do so.

I was an English teacher for about 35 years and then chose to... be involved in education but without all of the sound and fury that goes with being a teacher. – *TA, Primary school*

It's a good balance that I've got [now], and I really enjoy [it]. I still get that buzz in the classroom. I love it when you see kids, particularly in maths, when they suddenly get something and you're like, 'Yes.' You know, and it's great. It's hard to match that in any other job. So that's the bit I love about it. – *TA, Secondary school*

Former teachers also recognise their own expertise can positively contribute to pupil outcomes. They can take on more responsibilities related to teaching and learning when comfortable to do so and when the relationship with the teaching professional enables such partnership working. The modelling technique was mentioned several times in interviews, including for instructing TAs as part of professional development. This occurs when concepts or approaches are demonstrated, and individuals learn through observing.

Experience from outside the education sector

The survey findings indicate that 90% of TAs had paid work experience outside of education before becoming a TA. Prior work experience varied and included retail and hospitality, adult care or nursing work, publishing, administrative and office work and professional roles outside of teaching like policing. Some TAs moved from a previous role which they did not like whereas others had a career break before returning to work

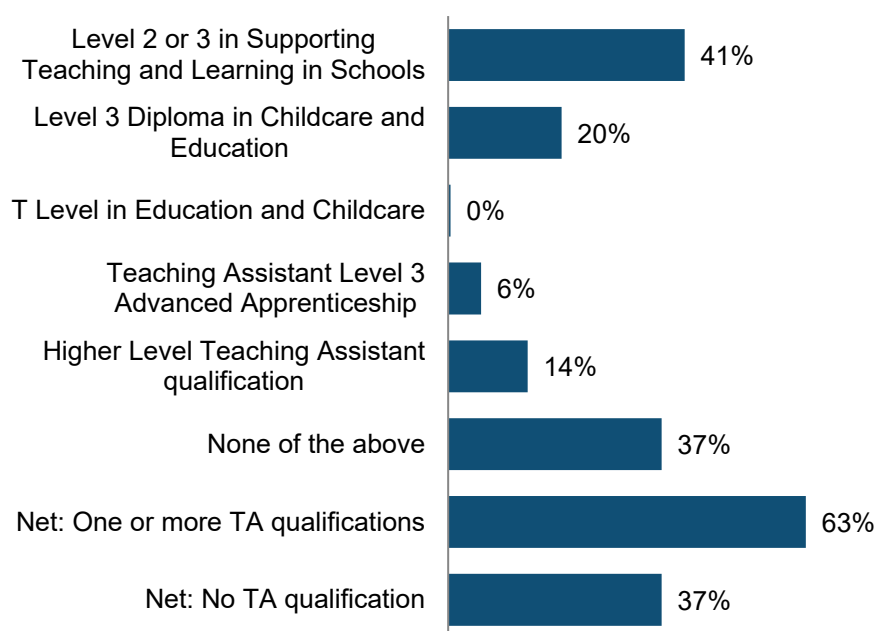
as a TA. The break was often after having children, although a couple of TAs were in education after a prior job.

Prior work experience sometimes provides valuable transferable skills for TAs. For example, those experienced in adult care or nursing may support pupils with medical and care needs in special schools or specialist settings. More broadly, TAs and leaders feel any work or personal experience that develops relevant soft skills such as resilience, empathy, adaptability and flexibility is important. Leaders say their core request from TAs is dependability and empathy with children. These personal attributes can be drawn from many prior experiences and TAs are often adept at using experiences to engage pupils.

Formal qualifications

The survey findings found that TAs hold a range of qualifications. Nearly two-thirds (63%) hold one or more relevant qualifications but this is heavily skewed in favour of primary TAs (Figure 2). A third (32%) have a degree, although the proportion was higher for TAs in secondary schools (46%). Only a small proportion (6%) hold initial teacher training qualifications and this proportion was again higher for TAs in secondary schools (11%). One in six (18%) TAs did not hold a qualification higher than Level 2 (GCSEs or equivalent).⁷

Figure 2: Relevant qualifications held by TAs



Source: TA survey. Base: 2,715

⁷ A further 5% reported that they did not have any of the stated qualifications which included qualifications equivalent to GCSE and above.

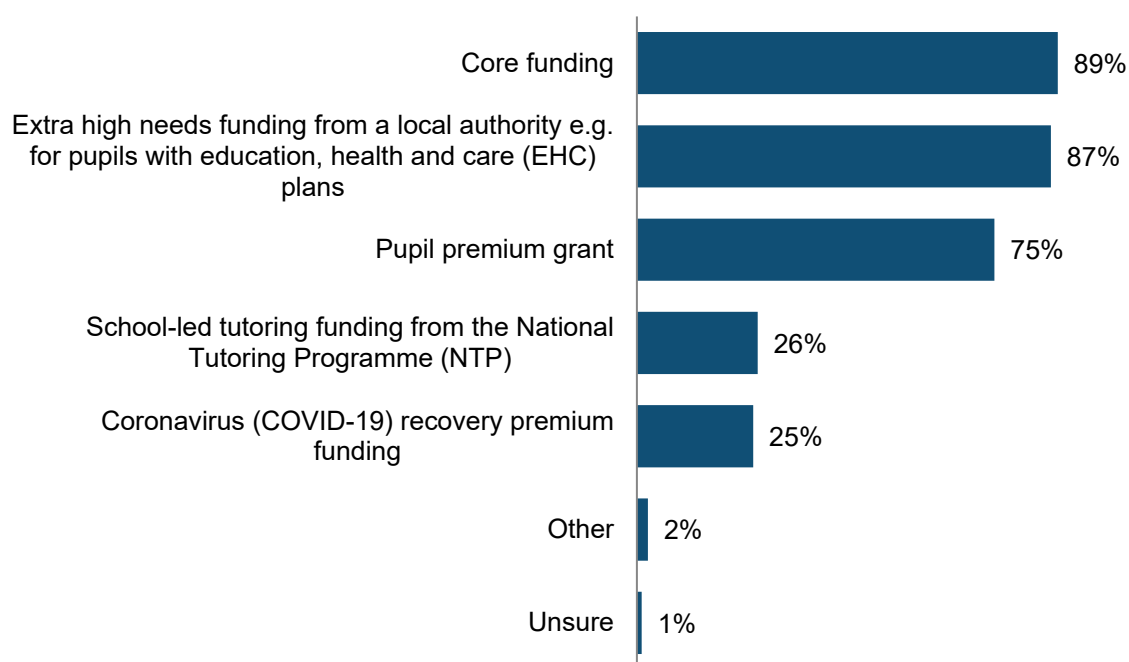
Funding teaching assistant posts

This section considers how schools fund TAs and any issues associated with this.

Sources of funding for TA positions in context

The leader survey found that schools use multiple streams to fund their TAs with three main sources predominating: core funding (89%), extra high needs funding from local authorities (LAs) for pupils with Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans, and pupil premium grant (Figure 3). Primary school leaders reported more diverse funding streams compared to those from secondary and special schools. Primary schools were nearly twice as likely to fund TA places through pupil premium grant (83%) compared to secondary (47%) and special (49%) schools. Two smaller funding streams were used to fund TA places more often in primary schools compared to secondary schools: funding from the National Tutoring Programme (28% in primary; 13% in secondary) and coronavirus recovery premium funding (27% and 15% respectively).

Figure 3: Income streams used to fund TAs in school



Source: Leader survey. Base: 1,296

Funding related to EHC plans

The number of pupils with SEND has been increasing year-on-year, as has the number with an EHC plan. Between 2018 and 2022, new EHC plans increased by 36% with the largest increases for children aged 0 to 4 (46%) and 11 to 15 (40%) years.⁸ Leaders

⁸ UK Government, Education, health and care plans 2023. Caseload data. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-health-and-care-plans>. Accessed 5/12/23.

perceive there are several underlying causes of the increase in EHC plans. Some believe the pandemic isolated children from their peers leading to problems ranging from socialisation with other pupils to speech and language difficulties. Other interviewees note parents have more information about the conditions that can affect children's learning and increasingly understand what information is needed to apply for an EHC plan.

Interviews with leaders in primary schools suggest that they do not always get the level of financial support they need for pupils with SEND who do not have or are awaiting an EHC plan. Leaders note the process for applying an EHC plan is lengthy, and it can be hard to identify some conditions at a young age. Some leaders feel that EHC plans are less common in primary settings compared to secondary schools as a result, which can reduce the funding available to meet the cost of the TA support where required.⁹

Leaders maintain that the funding associated with an EHC plan in which TA support is specified is insufficient. Schools pay the initial £6,000 from their core budgets and then draw additional funding from their LA's' high needs budgets. However, this funding is not perceived to be adequate by leaders and requires schools to meet the shortfall from their existing budgets.

In reality, each one [EHC plan] eats further and further into the budget. There is some funding that comes with those EHCPs, but it's not close to what we end up paying the TAs... In reality [the shortfall] means [TA pay] eats further and further into our day-to-day budget. –
Leader, Primary school

One primary leader's school was part of a LA-led pilot which relaxed some EHC plan funding rules. They said greater freedom allowed them to manage TA resource through pooling allotted EHC plan time where appropriate to make efficient use of TA time. This involved delivering stipulated hours to a group of identified pupils at the same time to achieve efficiencies.

Our SENCo [special educational needs co-ordinator] has taken a group of 25 children from across the school who are categorised on our data system as 'Well below out of year'... they're not even accessing the work of that year group. She has taken them as her, almost, teaching class and then we've attached two TAs into that class, because a lot of those children in there have got additional hours. It's very targeted support for those children, and [the pilot] allows us to really give some bespoke teaching, rather than them

⁹ While in previous years the proportion of EHC plans was higher in secondary compared to primary, in 2023, the proportion of pupils with EHC plans in primary and secondary schools was similar (at 2.5% and 2.4% respectively).

being in the class trying to get on with the work that the rest of the class is doing, but really not managing, because they might be two or three years behind. – *Leader, Primary school*

Further, leaders report that no extra pupil-based funding is provided for those with the other SEND plans (My Plan, SEN Support Plans, Individual Education Plans).

Leaders also note successful practices in teaching pupils with SEND at their school generate more demand for school places from the parents or carers of pupils with SEND. Leaders report that more pupils with EHC plans, or pending applications, attending the school exacerbates the funding gap. This issue can disproportionately affect primary schools that are less able to pool resources and operate efficiencies of scale. For example, a couple of larger secondary schools deploy TAs flexibly based on their skills, including some who move around the school to attend classes on request. Smaller school budgets cannot typically fund flexible options to meet increasing demand.

You'll also understand that where every child that's coming in with an EHCP, we are to allocate £6,000 out of the school budget before we move into the EHCP territory and the funding that comes with that. Now, that's all well and good, but if we don't know which children [without a plan] we're putting through the EHCPs... and we have 35 primary feeder schools, you'll understand how difficult that is to coordinate for my SENCo... If I'm suddenly putting 6, 7 or 8 EHCPs, then I am having to find £50,000 from somewhere that wasn't in the original budget for those children. – *Leader, Secondary school*

Wider funding options for TA positions

Several leaders describe additional ways they fund TA posts. These include generating revenue from private nurseries run by the school and employing TA apprentices via the Apprenticeship Levy (see Box 1). Larger schools relative to their phase are typically those which have an appropriate economy of scale to consider, plan and implement alternative funding arrangements. For example, such schools or trusts have planning staff or other administrative specialists with a business-focused role and the management capacity to explore financial options. One leader describes how the high number of pupils attracting pupil premium (nearly 40% of pupils at their school) provided significant funds to recruit the TAs they needed.

We have got 150 pupils on pupil premium [out of c400]. So an awful lot of our money spent on TAs comes from that pupil premium budget... Having an additional adult in that classroom supports with the teaching and learning and gives extra support to those pupil premium children. We're in a lucky position that we don't have a deficit budget... We are able to carry that expensive staffing cost year

on year because we're over-subscribed and our pupil premium [allocation] just keeps going up. – *Leader, Primary school*

Box 1: Training TAs using the apprenticeship levy

A leader from a two-form entry primary school uses the apprenticeship levy to recruit and train TAs. She describes this route as cost effective because they only pay 10% of the training; the levy held by the LA pays for the remainder.

The key challenge was understanding how the administration of the levy worked. They were advised by an external training provider that levy funds could be used for staff development, but the leader wanted to understand the wider process before committing. The leader worked with her business manager to learn more, and they realised they had been paying the levy for several years. They accrued a significant amount of budget over the previous two years and so began training existing and new TAs through this route.

The leader notes differences in the volume of advertising for levy funding compared with the National Professional Qualifications. She has subsequently trained other staff, including senior leaders, using levy funds for higher-level courses.

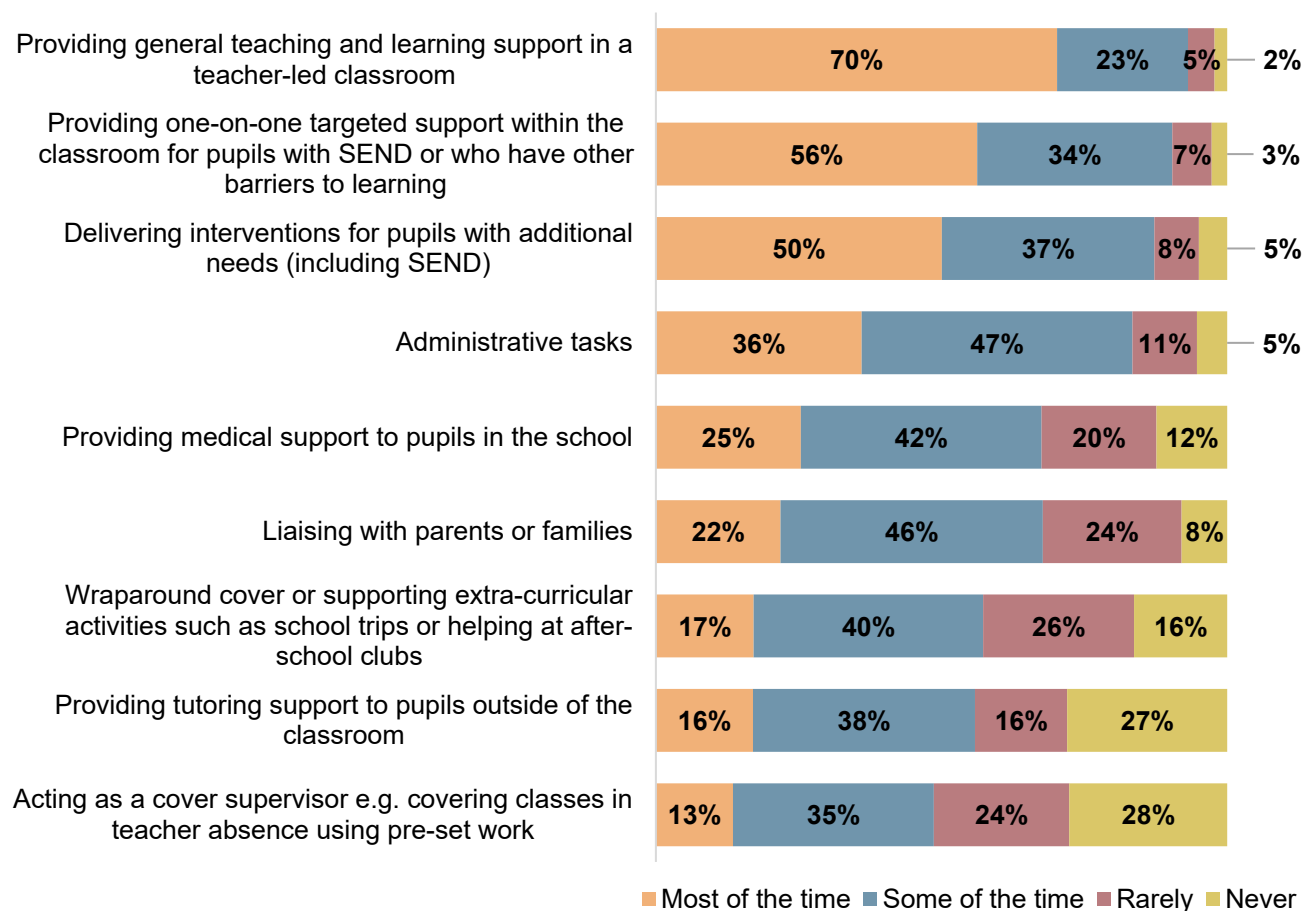
How teaching assistants are deployed

This section describes the roles and responsibilities of TAs by phase, how this has changed over recent years and the factors driving it, and satisfaction in their role.

The main roles and responsibilities of TAs

The survey findings indicated that TAs hold multiple responsibilities in schools. Overall, TAs reported that they spend most of their time on classroom tasks like general teaching and learning support (70%) and one-to-one targeted support for children with SEND or other barriers to learning (56%). Half (50%) spent most of their time delivering interventions for pupils with additional needs (Figure 4).

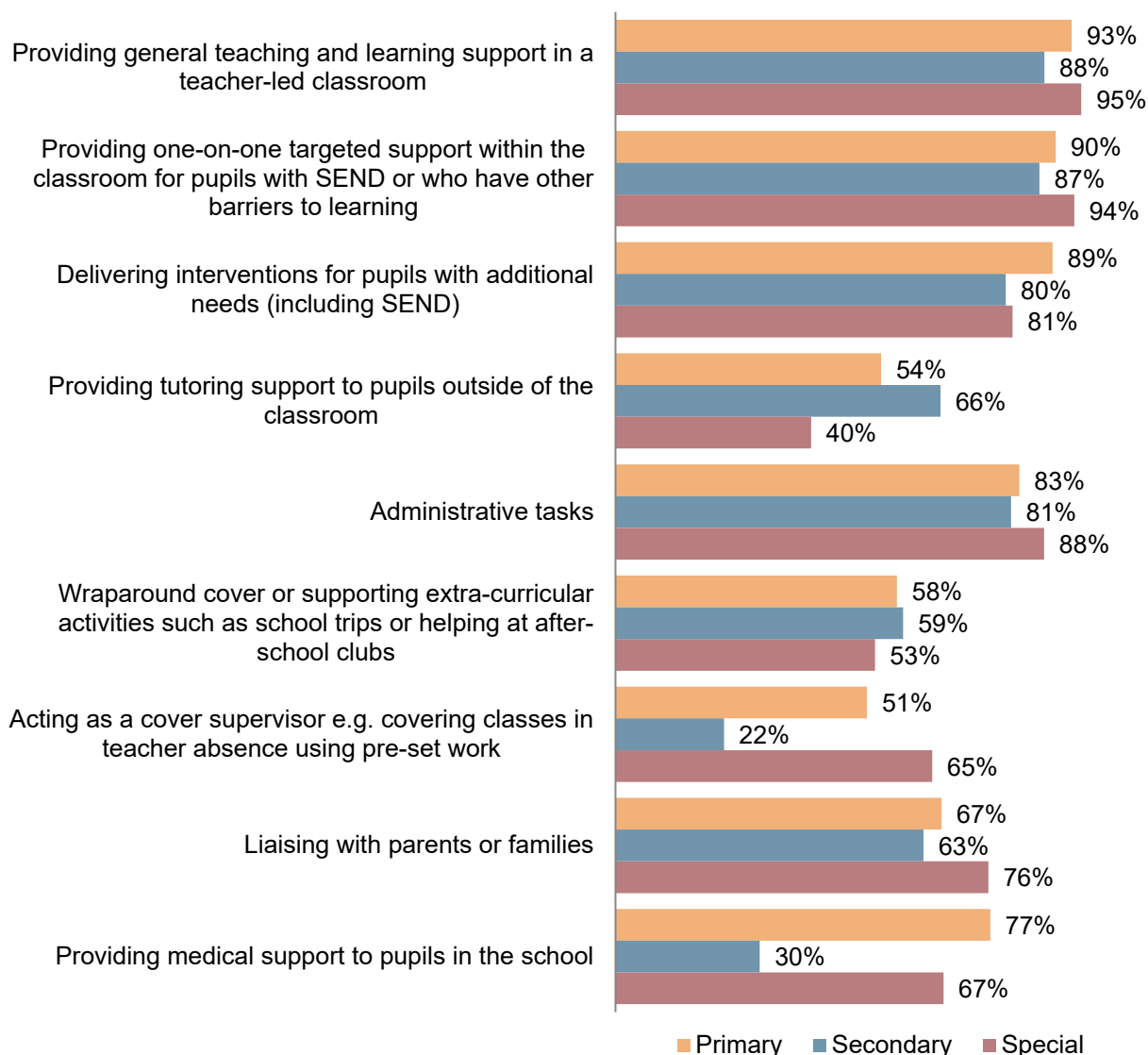
Figure 4: How often TAs provide types of support in their role (multiple response)



Source: TA survey. Base: 2,715

Analysis of the tasks performed by TAs most or some of the time indicates notable differences by phase, with secondary TAs appearing to differ most in their roles (Figure 5). Secondary TAs are less likely to provide general teaching and learning support (88%) compared to primary (93%) and special (95%) schools but more likely to provide tutoring support outside the classroom (66%) compared to primary (54%) and special schools (40%).

Figure 5: Types of support performed ‘most’ or ‘some’ of the time by phase/setting



Source: TA survey. Base: variable

Overall, TAs most commonly support pupils with EHC plans (76%) and those with SEND without an EHC plan (79%) but phase is important in determining which pupils TAs work with. The TA survey found 84% of secondary TAs support pupils with a EHC plan compared to 69% in primary and 93% in special schools.¹⁰ The next most common groups of pupils supported by TAs include those with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) issues (62%), pupils who are disadvantaged or those who attract pupil premium funding (58%) and children in need of catch-up learning (56%). Leaders, teachers and TAs describe how they are deployed on a whole class, one-to-one and group basis to meet the needs of pupils.

¹⁰ In 2023, 98.9% of pupils in special schools had an EHC plan. Children and young people without an EHC plan can only be placed in special schools in exceptional circumstances as outlined in the SEND Code of Practice: [SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/92626/SEND_code_of_practice_0_to_25_years_-_GOV.UK.pdf).

Whole class teaching and learning support

Interviewees describe how TAs are deployed to provide whole class support, helping teachers to deliver lessons, modelling what pupils are required to do and supporting particular pupils to understand the concepts being discussed.

Whole class teaching and learning support in primary schools

Most interviewees from primary schools report having at least one TA per class and, as with other school phases, they have dedicated one-to-one support where an EHC plan stipulates the need. Leaders and TAs state how they are typically assigned to a teacher for the duration of the academic year. Some TAs have long-standing relationships with teachers, having supported them for a number of years. The support is varied and encompasses preparing resources, assisting teachers in the delivery of lessons and support to pupils who may need extra help with concepts being taught. Examples of the specific roles of TAs include encouraging pupils to approach them if they are struggling with lessons, developing pupils' academic knowledge and specific pedagogical support. TAs describe the variety of the tasks they perform, adapting their role according to the needs of the teacher and pupils. Some TAs interviewed deliver teaching and learning support for a combination of subjects whereas others (typically those employed on a part-time basis due to funding issues) are deployed exclusively in the delivery of phonics and maths.

For those lower ability students or the students with SEND that the TAs are supporting, if that TA wasn't there, I know some of them would absolutely be struggling 100% because they wouldn't be able to cope with the pace of the rest of the group. It doesn't matter necessarily how much you differentiate and how much time you put into that, you can't deliver that to the same level that an individual TA can do. – *Teacher, Secondary school*

TAs act as a bridge between the pupils and teachers, taking the teachers' lesson and, where needed, further adapting it for pupils in a way they can understand. Some teachers and TAs describe working as a team, often interchangeably aligned to their respective skills and knowledge. For example, a TA with language skills delivering French lessons instead of the teacher. Teachers typically lead the learning, sharing lesson plans and ideas with TAs who offer valuable insight about what strategies will work with particular pupils. However, this is not to say that TAs do not shape the direction of learning, with TAs also supporting planning in some schools. The demarcation of tasks between teachers and TAs in primary schools can therefore be fluid and dependent on several factors including the level of experience held by the TA and the quality of the teacher and TA relationship.

[TA's] do a variety of roles and [work] interchangeably with the teachers. The teachers are those that lead the learning within the class, they plan the learning and share that with the TAs. But that's not to say some of the TAs don't have a real ear on some of that planning as well because they will have got to know particular pupils really, really well. – *Leader, Special school*

Leaders and teachers state that a significant aspect of the TA role is pastoral. They nurture relationships with pupils, particularly those with SEND. These trusting relationships help to de-escalate issues which can emerge in the classroom setting with the potential to disrupt learning. Teachers acknowledge that pupils need more time than they can provide given increasing class sizes and workload, and value the support provided by TAs.

Lesson cover support is also mentioned by a minority of TAs in primary schools. These tend to be higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) who are deployed to cover parts of lessons or conduct specific activities with the whole class in large settings. However, most leaders interviewed prefer not to use TAs as cover in contrast to the survey findings (see Figure 5), and instead seeking alternative solutions in the event of staff absence. They do not consider it appropriate to ask TAs to assume teaching responsibilities unless recruited for this task.

I was [working] in a year group [on] reading and interventions... And then I started with covering classes ... and I enjoyed the challenge. So sometimes there were days and I would just come in and I've been told, "Okay, this is the class I'm going to go in." So as long as the teacher gives me the [lesson] plan and everything I can teach that, [cover is] not a problem. So... I've covered classes from [Year] 1 to Year 6; that's what I really do on a daily basis now. – *TA, Primary school*

Box 2: TAs providing whole class support in primary schools

A TA in a small semi-urban village primary school with 100 pupils offers a variety of support to the different classes in which she works depending on the subjects being taught and the ability of the children. All of the TAs in her school, other than the one in the reception class, work across multiple classes as part of their role.

Her role is varied and includes delivery of different types of support. At times, she provides general teaching and learning support to the teacher. This includes moving around the classroom to identify any pupils who need additional input to carry out the task and undertaking live marking. The length of time she spends with a pupil differs according to how long they need to comprehend the task. She notes how children gain confidence from another adult being present in the classroom to whom they can ask questions while the teacher is undertaking other tasks. On other occasions, she supports specific groups of children in the classroom setting. For example, she works with those who need additional support to understand a particular learning activity or with higher ability children to stretch their learning. By working with different groups of children in this way, she and the teachers hope to avoid stigmatising those who struggle with their learning.

Whole class teaching and learning support in secondary schools

Whole-class support is less common in secondary schools where TAs are more often deployed to support small groups or individuals on a one-to-one basis. When implemented, leaders prefer to assign TAs to specific subjects where they have the requisite skills and knowledge to support delivery although this is dependent upon both the number of TAs they have in school and number of pupils with additional needs. Interviewees perceive that TAs with subject knowledge are better able to support pupils to learn relevant concepts which, in the view of leaders and TAs, results in better pupil progression and outcomes. Two knowledgeable adults in a class offer complementary pedagogical techniques for pupils and additional support for those who need it. TAs in secondary schools are more likely to have degree qualifications than those in primary and special schools. Some TAs have requested that they are deployed in the subjects in which they are qualified as they believe they will have greater impact on pupil outcomes. However, secondary TAs or leaders rarely give examples of classroom cover supervision – partly because this is provided by cover supervisors and external supply.

Whole class teaching and learning support in special schools

TA deployment in special schools typically mirrors that of primary schools, where TAs perform a range of roles to support delivery of the curriculum by the teacher. Class sizes are typically smaller because the needs of pupils are so diverse with more than one TA often deployed in a classroom (three to four being relatively common). Pupils' needs are

generally greater than in mainstream schools, requiring more adults in classes to meet these needs. The range of required skills and specialist roles for TAs is also wider to cover the breadth and depth of pupil requirements. Deployment works most effectively when TAs work collectively and collaboratively to meet the needs of the pupils in the class. This extends to those TAs providing one-to-one support to a pupil with more complex needs.

TAs and leaders describe a mix of experiences on the TA roles covering whole class support in special settings. Some TAs consulted only cover classes if a teacher leaves the room for a short period. Others say they have covered classes when staff are absent. Several leaders want TAs to cover lessons in short absences because supply teachers do not have the necessary relationships with pupils to deliver effective lessons: more learning is achieved through using TAs as cover. TAs rarely perform cover supervision alone, mostly working with at least one other TA. One special school TA said they were responsible for running a class and planning the subject area for a couple of days a week. This individual is a former secondary school teacher, so has the relevant classroom experience. This is a good example of a school using the prior experience of a TA to infill for vacant teacher positions.

Hopefully I will progress [with some teaching] within the same setting that I'm in at the moment... If I was to leave where I am it wouldn't be to go to another school... I don't want to go back into a mainstream setting, I have no desire whatsoever to go back into secondary and I just think, I'm now in my 50s, I don't want to start again at a new school. – *TA, Special school*

The forthcoming parallel study on supply teaching offers some insight on TAs covering lessons in special schools. A couple of leaders in that study consider the relationships between staff and pupils as paramount in special settings. Some pupils with SEND can react poorly to adults they do not know, and supply teachers rarely possess the level of skills required to support classes where all pupils have SEND. Instead, leaders of special schools prefer to redeploy other members of staff, including TAs or a member of SLT, to cover a teacher absence. In some instances, they will obtain a supply TA to backfill the role of the TA providing cover.

Targeted one-to-one support

Leaders and teachers aspire for pupils to be as independent as possible and deploy TAs on a one-to-one basis only where stipulated for children with complex needs. Their preference is for targeted support for pupils in small groups delivered in or outside the classroom or a 'helicopter' approach that prepares a child for independent learning. Here, the TA starts a child off on an activity but then works with others before returning to help with any problems, reassure and refocus. In line with EEF guidance about helping pupils

develop independent learning skills¹¹, leaders express concern about the ‘velcro’ model of teaching where the TA is constantly with the pupil and works directly with them. Many TAs and leaders say assigning a single TA to one pupil can make that pupil dependent on the adult. A few also think a pupil’s behaviour can worsen if their usual adult is not present so strategies to avoid such situations help the whole class.

Targeted one-to-one support in primary schools

Interviewees report that one-to-one support is provided by TAs to pupils with an EHC plan to enable them to access learning. This can be performed by a TA recruited to work with a specific child on a one-to-one basis when stipulated by an EHC plan or the TA assigned to the class who undertakes this as part of their teaching and learning duties (as described in 3.5.2.1). Many leaders describe using TAs flexibly, maximising the support available to class teachers by encouraging TAs to work more broadly when the child they support is working independently. One-to-one support is primarily delivered in the classroom setting although pupils with behavioural issues are often accommodated in an alternate space in the school. Several leaders support the needs of pupils with an EHC plan by varying the TA assigned and finding opportunities for the pupil to work independently where possible because this develops skills such as resilience, self-awareness and confidence. Direct one-to-one relationships are necessary for some pupils with specific or complex educational needs or disability (e.g., some expressions of autism or disabilities requiring specialist skills from the TA). The TA may have relevant experience or training in the specific needs of the pupil although increasingly TAs are supported to become specialists whilst in the role.

Targeted one-to-one support in secondary schools

One-to-one support for pupils with an EHC plan is common in secondary schools although the way in which it is deployed varies. Secondary leaders are more likely to offer cross-school TA support and resources compared to primary leaders. Secondary schools are also bigger based on pupil numbers and estate space. TAs working one-to-one with children may stay with the pupil throughout their time at the school and transition with them from lesson to lesson. In this instance, they are more likely to have knowledge of or experience in the underlying educational, health and social needs of the pupil rather than the subject being taught. Effective TAs understand underlying needs and how they present with a specific pupil. One-to-one relationships are important to help pupils engage with learning more frequently, and for longer periods.

We have got two students that you would normally think of in a specialist school. But the parents wanted them to go to mainstream, and we support them literally from the moment they walk in the door

¹¹ Education Endowment Foundation (2021). Making best use of teaching assistants. Guidance Report. London: EEF

until the moment they need their parents to get them. So, that's breaks, lunches, and everything – *TA, Secondary school*

However, some secondary schools deploy TAs with subject-specific knowledge meaning they work on a one-to-one basis with different pupils throughout the day in a specific lesson. TAs are often assigned to departments, especially for English and maths support.

Leaders describe a variety of pastoral support they provide to pupils and sometimes deploy TAs to fulfil these duties. Targeted one-to-one support in secondary schools therefore extends to the provision of SEMH support outside of lessons in specialist areas. Examples include support hubs and facilities for pupils to access. Several leaders note that non-teaching time in schools can be especially challenging for pupils with SEND which makes these spaces valuable. Delivered by TAs, this support is intended to address barriers to learning and attendance.

Box 3: TAs offering a flexible approach to meet pupils' academic and SEMH needs in secondary schools

A TA in a rural secondary school in the South West works with pupils with SEND in a range of different ways in response to their individual needs. This is on a one-to-one basis with different pupils throughout the school day. This can be in the classroom or in spaces away from it and in relation to a variety of subjects. The support provided includes help to complete lesson tasks assigned by the subject teacher, improve skills such as reading, and aid their wellbeing by supervising them when needing quiet time away from the classroom to refocus their attention. The latter can include going for a walk with them to enable them to have a break so that they are better able to return and learn in the classroom environment. When providing academic support, the TA helps the pupils to complete their lessons by answering any questions, scribing or typing their thoughts for them, or reading texts when they struggle.

Targeted one-to-one support in special schools

Targeted one-to-one support in special schools is delivered by TAs where required, with more TAs working on this basis when compared to other phases. The ratio of TAs to teachers and pupils is much higher compared to mainstream. The specific needs of the pupils in each class determines how they are deployed. Those with a higher volume of pupils with complex needs require more one-to-one support whereas others deploy several TAs in a classroom to meet the needs of pupils collectively. TAs deployed on a one-to-one basis are often in response to specific medical needs.

We have a handful of TAs that are assigned and named as one-to-ones in a classic sense, but that's around the medical training they've had specifically for a pupil. – *Leader, All through special school*

As the educational needs and disabilities of pupils may be more complex in special settings, the physical and mental health skill requirements for TAs is too. Leaders in special schools therefore favour TAs with specialist skills (e.g. knowledge of autism or specific medical procedures) and those with experience in health and social care. In many cases, TAs do not possess these skills and must acquire them through professional development. Special schools accommodate the needs of a diverse range of pupils and require TAs that can collectively offer the breadth of skills and experience to effectively meet them.

[Some TAs] will become specifically trained in certain medical procedures or care procedures ranging from simple ones [like] supporting dyslexia and things like that, but right up to emergency medication administration for epilepsy. We have some TAs that are supporting tracheostomy care and sectioning and right up to other medical procedures that I probably can't even pronounce. – *Leader, Special school*

Group support activities

Group support involves the delivery of interventions to groups of pupils both in and outside the classroom by TAs. The types of interventions delivered differ but range from phonics and literacy through to pastoral support. Group sessions are delivered to pupils with a range of needs, from SEND through to pupils in need of catch-up learning.

Group support in primary schools

Primary school TAs support small numbers of pupils together in and out of the classroom on a range of interventions. Academically, TAs work with small groups to review elements of a lesson again to improve comprehension or address gaps in learning. The latter includes catch-up learning in response to the pandemic. Most interviewees discuss literacy interventions and phonics – maths is discussed less. Leaders prefer to deliver group support in the classroom wherever possible. Removing pupils can lead to stigma which is detrimental to progress and/or result in them missing other important concepts in the lesson. Some schools are addressing this by dividing the whole class into groups to deliver a subject, removing any segregation so pupils in need of additional support are less visible.

However, group learning outside the classroom is sometimes deemed necessary. One TA gave the example of whole-class phonics for which some children struggle blending sounds i.e., combining individual sounds to make words. This requires pupils to listen to and speak different sounds which is difficult when a class is ongoing.

Behavioural group interventions cover techniques for pupils to develop self-awareness and control their behaviour. These typically relate to pupils with SEND with an EHC plan

and/or those behaving poorly in class. These group interventions are usually delivered out of the classroom to minimise disruption. Several TAs discuss “zones of regulation” to help pupils categorise their feelings and develop techniques to manage them.

In regard to my group, some [interventions are] boosters whereby the children are struggling and I ... mop up any gaps that might be there from previous learning. Doing social skills, zones of regulation, it helps the children to regulate themselves so that they can access the learning and they're not being distracted by behaviours, etc. – *TA, Primary school*

Group support in secondary schools

More secondary school TAs work with groups of pupils outside of the classroom in designated specialist areas. Several secondary schools operate learning or support hubs which are dedicated spaces in the school in which learning and behavioural support is provided. This features literacy and maths lessons, including for those disapplied from curriculum subjects¹². Group support is typically timetabled during lesson periods although support hubs often operate on a drop-in basis during breaks. TAs also run some subject-specific group sessions because they are gateway subjects for learning.

So I started in 2003, as a teaching assistant, and then for the last 15 years, I've been a learning mentor as well ... [which offers] pastoral help as well... I don't go in classes much now, I'm more likely to have small groups out of lessons. They've been disapplied from foreign languages, so they come to me for additional literacy lessons. – *TA, Secondary school*

Group support in special schools

Interviewees indicate that groups sessions away from the classroom are less common in special schools in line with the survey findings. Class sizes are smaller and staff to pupil ratios are higher, so lessons are already delivered in smaller groups compared to mainstream. TAs do conduct small group sessions in classes and these cover similar sorts of activities as per interventions in primary schools. The key difference is behavioural interventions are more likely to be delivered in the classroom.

Pastoral and non-classroom responsibilities

TAs perform a range of tasks in schools that extend beyond teaching and learning. These include administrative tasks and supporting extra-curricular activities.

¹² Cases in which a pupil is not required to take a core national curriculum subject for religious, medical or mental health reasons.

Other responsibilities in primary schools

The range of other responsibilities performed by TAs in primary schools varies significantly, with leaders deploying them pragmatically in response to emerging needs. Many TAs do not hold a job description and leaders' expectations vary. TAs are often called upon to plug gaps in capacity across the school on both a planned and reactive basis (e.g. in the event that a mid-day supervisor is absent).

Administrative tasks are often activities traditional to the role such as preparing resources, sorting out classroom displays and materials, and general administrative duties. The latter can include administration related to an EHC plans and logging safeguarding issues. Pre-school, break and lunch duties are fulfilled by some primary school TAs on a rota basis. This is considered part of their role by some leaders while others deem it to be an additional requirement that exceeds what would normally be expected of a TA. Some TAs also describe how they are required to run additional group interventions to pupils at lunch, such as study support and catch-up interventions. Some leaders provide extra income for TAs if duties fall outside of regular hours although a significant proportion receive no additional payment. In the TA survey, 45% said they are paid overtime while 45% are not. The remainder preferred not to say or did not know.

The teaching assistants would be used for lunchtime clubs [and to develop] the cultural capital of the children, providing them with opportunities that we wouldn't be able to provide. [TAs] do after school clubs, accelerated reading with the classroom ... they'll promote ... the reading ability of the children targeting specific children based on their [individual education plan or EHC plan]. They're stretched to maximise every minute that we've got them within school. – *Teacher, Primary school*

Several leaders and teachers note these duties remain necessary to support the day-to-day running of schools. If TAs were unavailable, other staff would need to perform these functions.

Other responsibilities in secondary schools

Pre-school and break duties are also fulfilled by some secondary school TAs interviewed although broader administrative tasks appear less common. Secondary TAs provide pupils with SEND with extra support during lunch breaks or specific one-to-one support throughout the day (including lunch and breaks). One key difference with primary schools is the offer of optional support. Whilst some pupils have timetabled support, secondary schools with support hubs also offer help to students who choose to attend. This includes social support for pupils with SEND mentioned by a few interviewees. Some pupils with SEND find breaks and social times in schools challenging because of the interaction with other pupils. Separate hubs provide a space for those pupils to go if required. One leader

discusses how their TAs support pupils in preparing for further education and college interviews or take small groups to coffee shops to help them socialise.

I also do what's called 'study space,' and this is open to all. At 15:00 when students go home, we run two areas for study space... I and another colleague will be in the Key Stage 4, because we know their timetable and we know what work they have. From 15:00 until 16:00, we provide students with a place to do homework and a computer screen. It was initially intended for Pupil Premium and SEN, because homework is a difficulty. But it is open to all and we get a mixture, a complete mixture. – *TA, Secondary school*

Other responsibilities in special schools

Pupils' medical and healthcare needs are greater in special schools. TAs support pupils in many ways ranging from toileting, issuing medication and managing conditions such as epilepsy. The range of skills required of TAs is broad and is one reason why leaders consider employment background when recruiting TAs.

Parental and family liaison roles are also more likely to be undertaken by special school TAs because they develop strong support relationships with pupils. A couple of interviewees link parental liaison to safeguarding administrative practices such as logging safeguarding concerns. Other TAs undertake administrative tasks that document safeguarding activities like risk assessments and home visits.

Leadership responsibilities

Some TAs across all phases lead specific activities, although it is rarer in primary schools. In secondary and special schools, for example, some help manage administrative duties such as assisting with timetabling for pupils with SEND. Others run a specific intervention or service such as literacy scheme or higher education applications. The few examples in primary schools include responsibilities like managing forest schools or safeguarding. In all cases, the TAs had the relevant experience, knowledge and/or professional development (including Level 3 HLTA qualifications) to perform these tasks on behalf of the school.

How the responsibilities of TAs have changed

In the TA survey, nine-in-ten (90%) said their responsibilities and workload had increased during their career; two-thirds (67%) said it had increased a lot.

Both TAs and school leaders reported several reasons why TAs responsibilities have increased over the past few years. TAs describe how their role has expanded in response to both the demands of the curriculum and the legislative processes that

schools are required to adhere to, including safeguarding and the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Other interviewees note difficulties in teacher recruitment or increasing teacher workloads leads to some professional or administrative responsibilities falling to suitably experienced or qualified TAs. Some leaders seek to fully utilise the skills of the TAs that they recruit, evolving their role pragmatically around their experience to harness the skillset that they bring. This can result in increased responsibilities. This is perceived as a development opportunity by some whilst others feel that it is not part of the TA role. Most TAs take pride and satisfaction in improving the learning and lives of the pupils they support and for many, taking on extra responsibilities comes with the TA role.

We're expected to do all the targets ... that you've got to review every term. You've got this assessment to fill out, reports that are a profile on the student. What they're about, what triggers them, how to manage their behaviour... You have to fill this paperwork out all the time because it might be a new behaviour and you're like 'OK, I have to put that in. OK. I'll log that in'. It's constant paperwork. Teachers get PPA time. We don't get any time. You just have to do it when you can and where you can. – *TA, Special school*

They've had to become more professional, and they've had to become educators, as opposed to nurturers and care assistants. To me that's the significant change. – *Leader, Special school*

Some interviewees say the characteristics of children and the support they need has changed, especially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Primary leaders and most TAs working in the foundation stage report that pupils entering reception classes are less emotionally, socially and physically developed. This presents as more children who struggle to socialise with others, more with speech and language difficulties, and more requiring support with toileting.

The anxiety levels for young people have gone sky high... We've got children in reception in Year 1 who have significant speech and language problems; that means that their ability to manage the classroom is compromised... You might not have that quite so much at secondary level but at primary level they come in and they can barely speak, they're not toilet trained. So COVID-19 has really impacted in all ages, but particularly those youngsters who were born during COVID. – *TA, Primary school*

Other interviewees report more mental health issues with older pupils in primary and secondary settings. This means that the role of TAs has expanded to meet these needs.

Since the COVID-19 Pandemic, we've seen a huge uptake in pupils presenting with severe anxiety into school. Our TAs have been re-utilised. I just mentioned our Link Room [a transition space before pupils enter classrooms] that was barely used prior to COVID-19 but now that's got quite a significant population of pupils. We've now got two nurturing groups at Year 7 and Year 8 who are taught almost as a school within a school. – *Teacher, Secondary school*

Some leaders and TAs in mainstream schools think limited places in special schools lead to more pupils with SEND educated in mainstream schools. Some leaders feel TA resourcing becomes stretched as their roles increase, which limits TAs' impact on pupil outcomes because they have less time to support all pupils with needs.

Most TAs and school leaders think schools rely on the commitment and goodwill of TAs and feel TA pay does not reflect the contribution they make to pupils' learning and progress. This includes those pupils less frequently supported directly by TAs because lessons overall can progress at a faster pace of learning and are less often disrupted by poor behaviour. Although the experiences of recruitment and retention vary, this is a challenge for some leaders who raise concerns about the level of pay for the wider range of responsibilities many TAs now possess. While 57% of the TAs surveyed were not considering leaving their current TA role, pay (60%) and a lack of progression opportunities (40%) were greatest causes for dissatisfaction amongst those who were.

I think the overwhelming majority of [TAs] do a remarkable job with no real support, no real qualifications, just with goodwill. We're relying on their goodwill and that is something that is very fragile as well... If we make a wrong decision as part of a leadership team that was to upset our teaching assistants, we would be in awful position as a school if they were to disappear. – *Leader, Primary school*

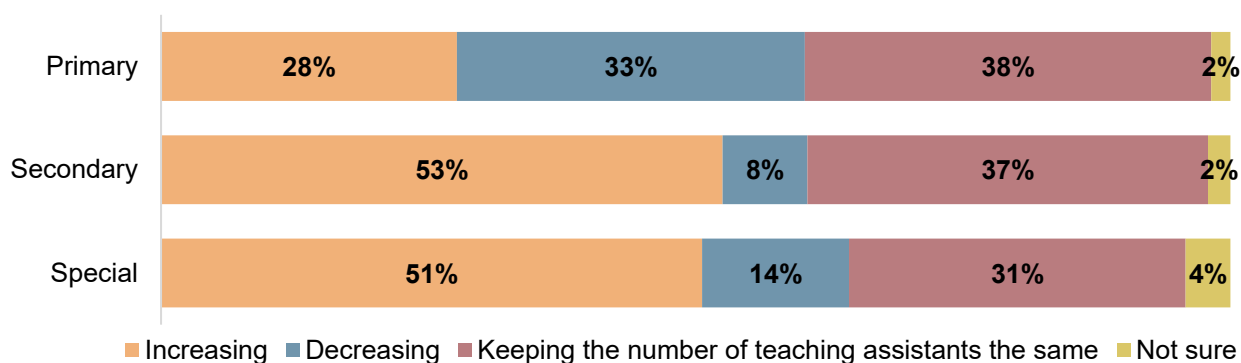
The factors that influence the number of TAs

The differences in deployment of TAs outlined helps to explain why the number of TAs vary by phase. The clearest difference is for special schools who employ TAs (and teachers) to much smaller pupil ratios because the needs of special school pupils are often greater compared to those in mainstream primary and secondary schools.

The leaders survey found half of secondary (53%) and special schools (51%) were planning to increase TA numbers in the next academic year. The main reason to do so was the increase in the number of pupils with SEND (93%). A third of primary leaders (33%) expected TA numbers to fall. Nearly every leader expecting a fall in the number of TAs cited financial pressures as one of the reasons why (97%). Only 12% of primary schools said they were planning to reduce TA numbers because of pupil rolls. The

leaders interviewed reinforced this, stating that they were reducing TA number as they can no longer afford the volume they have.

Figure 6: Whether school is considering increasing or decreasing its TAs by phase



Source: Leader survey. Base: 1,296

Nearly all leaders interviewed maintain that the number of TAs they employ has increased significantly over the past five years. Many, particularly in mainstream settings, cite an increase in the number of pupils with SEND as the main driving factor. Leaders in mainstream schools often suggest that an insufficient number of places in special or alternative provision has led to an increase in pupils with SEND entering mainstream settings. In their view, reduced budgets for special and alternative provision in addition to increasing demand for this diminishing resource, has resulted in more children with SEND, including those with complex needs, entering mainstream schools.

There's very little specialist provision in the local area. I think the local authority are constantly looking for places [for] children with high need... And then we try really hard to give them that chance to succeed but it obviously comes with a massive amount of challenges at the same time. – *Leader, Secondary school*

Some of these pupils have an EHC plan whilst others are either in the assessment process or have a level of need that can be met through support that already exists. Leaders and teachers state that they cannot manage the needs of these pupils – which can span education, health and social care – alongside those of potentially up to 30 other pupils in the class, hampering pupil progress, levels of attainment and behaviour during lessons. As a result, they require the help of more TAs.

The view that classes cannot adequately function without TA support is especially strong amongst primary leaders and TAs. They say quality of education and pupil outcomes suffer without TAs because the teacher spends more time managing behaviour and support needs than teaching. Primary pupils are younger and therefore less able to work independently when teachers are required to respond to emerging needs and issues.

Just having two adults in a classroom a lot of the time, even if it's a one-to-one TA, is really helpful. So, if you've got a diabetic child that suddenly needs medication, or you have a child that [is] really struggling because of something that has happened at home, [two adults in the class means you can] carry on the learning for everybody else whilst supporting that child. [It] might be that the teacher deals with [an issue] and the TA carries on supporting the children in class, or the other way round, but just having the two members of staff in a classroom is very beneficial. – *Leader, Primary school*

It doesn't matter how hard we try, that proportion of children in the class that need the additional support is growing and growing and growing. And so, that targeted support is absolutely essential. – *Teacher, Primary school*

Whilst leaders referred to increasing class sizes in primary schools, it is the higher volume of pupils with SEND within these larger classes that is reportedly the main factor driving TA deployment in most cases. Larger class sizes exacerbate the challenges faced by teachers when they are required to differentiate learning to accommodate the various needs of pupils. The minority that referenced class sizes more broadly discussed the challenge of 'getting around' all pupils which hinders both academic and emotional and social progress. TAs can help provide further support in these instances.

We have quite a large reception class: we've got almost 31 in our class, and just over half of those are in the SEND category, and if they've not been diagnosed they are currently going through it... I wouldn't have survived this last year without my TA. There's been times when she's taken over and taught the class. – *Teacher, Primary school*

Leaders of primary and secondary schools describe how they support pupils who are in the EHC plan application process. These leaders require TAs to support the pupil in order for them to access learning but until the plan is agreed they have no budget outside of the school's notional SEN budget, to fund this. If an EHC plan is agreed, the additional financial support starts from the agreement date as it is not backdated. The delay and timing places financial strain on the school and workload pressures on TAs. Leaders want to put that support in place; however, limited budgets mean many leaders cannot employ the number of TAs they want to and therefore are required to develop creative ideas to use the TAs they have. In primary settings, this includes using classroom-based TAs for only part of the day.

What TAs like the most about their role

The TA survey found three-quarters (75%) of TAs were satisfied with their role overall, although dissatisfaction was slightly higher amongst those working in secondary schools (16%) compared to TAs in primary or special schools (both 11%).

TAs draw satisfaction from making a difference to pupils, supporting their education and social development to enhance outcomes. Many TAs and some leaders think the most important and enjoyable part of a TA's role is developing good learning relationships with pupils. The features of such a relationship are trust, empathy and an interest in seeing a pupil develop. TAs feel they typically develop stronger learning relationships with pupils compared to teachers, a view supported by leaders. Several TAs with teaching experience make direct comparisons with teaching and enjoy developing stronger learning relationships with fewer pupils. These TAs say it is impossible to get to know a whole taught class in the same way as a teacher because they spend less time with each class member. Regardless of experience, nearly all TAs connect the support they provide with pupils' academic progress and social development and perceive a causal relationship, which drives their satisfaction with the role.

I remember one child, when I was supporting [in maths], I was explaining a task to them, and his reaction was, "Oh, I get it now." That makes you feel good in yourself, you think, "Oh gosh, maybe I am making a bit of an impact then." – *TA, Primary school*

The impact of teaching assistants

Recent studies demonstrate a large positive impact on pupil outcomes when TAs support specialist interventions. The EEF¹³ found TAs delivering targeted curriculum interventions to small groups or individual pupils (e.g. literacy or maths) can progress learners' outcomes by five months (i.e. their progression is five months further along than it would be without TA support). This section considers the impacts of TAs – both in relation to pupil outcomes and more broadly in terms of workload – and the factors that make them more or less effective in their role.

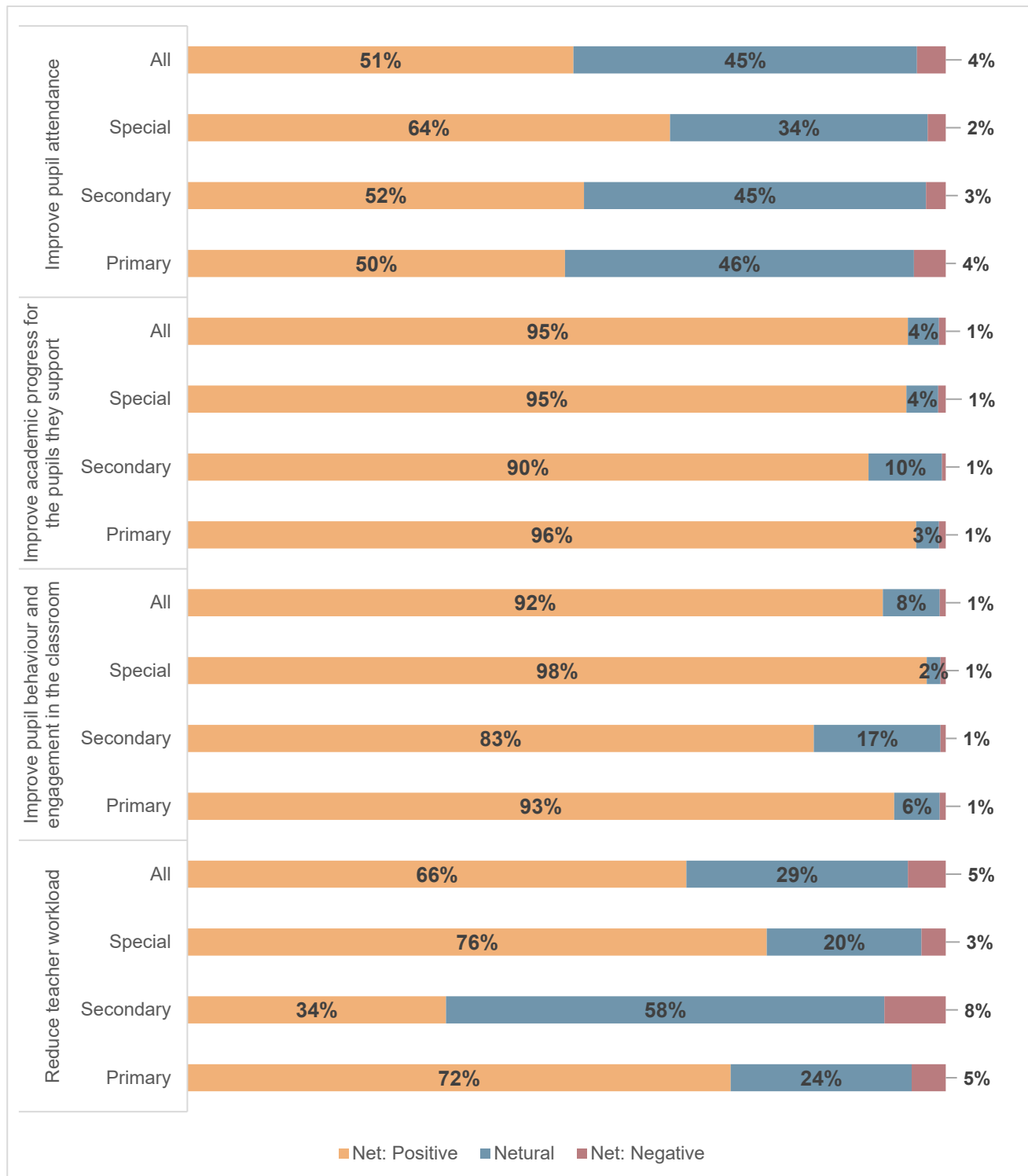
The nature of the impacts

The school leader survey overwhelmingly indicates that leaders are very positive about the impact of TAs, although there are notable differences by phase. Almost all leaders irrespective of phase say that TAs have a positive impact in terms of improving pupil behaviour and engagement in the classroom and improving academic progress. Whilst most primary and special school leaders say TAs also help reduce teacher workload,

¹³ Education Endowment Foundation (2021). Making best use of teaching assistants. Guidance Report. London: EEF

secondary school leaders are mostly neutral in their response. The impact on pupil attendance across all phases is also more neutral when compared to other impacts reported (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Whether TAs have a positive or negative impact at schools



Source: Leader survey. Base: 1,296

Pupil behaviour and engagement

TAs develop trusting and positive relationships with pupils which allows them to better understand their needs and implement strategies to foster engagement in lessons. This does not mean a TA is always supporting the same pupil (as per 'velcroing') but that the TA continues to be present in some form over a long period. Both teachers and TAs believe the role of a TA illustrates the value of strong learning relationships with pupils and helps develop softer skills that are hard to formally teach.

TAs apply this understanding to support pupils more effectively in the classroom, improving their willingness and readiness to learn. TAs build confidence, recognise and manage triggers of behavioural traits, and scaffold learning appropriately through structured support to address barriers to learning. They identify pupils who are struggling to keep pace with the lesson (often lower ability or pupils with SEND) and implement actions accordingly to ensure they remain engaged in the lesson. TAs can also act as a communication bridge between the pupil and teacher. Many interviewees say pupils often feel more comfortable admitting to a TA that they do not understand something in class. Working with a skilled TA will help the pupil understand which, in the view of leaders and TAs, leads to improved pupil progress. TAs support pupils with SEND, helping them learn within the class rather than away from others and prevent gaps in learning emerging. Leaders, teachers and TAs maintain that teachers with responsibility for a large class of children cannot nurture individual relationships of this nature. Many TAs strongly value the connections they build with the pupils they support.

Some of them have got quite complex needs and certainly those children wouldn't be able to get on without one-to-one support, and if they weren't getting on, the rest of the class wouldn't be getting on. They're having a huge impact on behaviour because they are ensuring that their one-to-one child is on task and focussed. –
Teacher, Primary school

TAs' abilities to nurture relationship with pupils is key in special schools where pupils have complex needs that necessitate closer relationships to manage.

Hundreds of kids come and go at this school and when they start in Year 7 to when they leave and ... we all go, "Would you believe that was that kid in Year 7?" They'd come in kicking and screaming and trashing the classroom and not listening and disengaged, and then when they leave they're like a different child. And then you think, 'we've done that'. – *TA, Special school*

In some instances, an outside or personal skill possessed by the TA (rather than something learned in professional development) enables them to engage pupils and this underlines the level of commitment these TAs have towards their role.

Most leaders and teachers maintain that TAs' management of behaviour has significant benefits for both the individual pupils being supported and the wider class. TAs help manage behaviour that has the potential to interrupt the lesson and adversely impact on pupil outcomes more broadly. Teachers report that TAs can read a room and anticipate potential disruption, implementing action to prevent its occurrence. Support to manage behaviour is especially important in a special school where it has the potential to escalate into potentially harmful incidences for both pupils and staff.

If you don't catch the violence and aggression, you lose the rest of the students. And I think the support staff catch it [behaviour] before it comes violent and aggressive. – *Teacher, Special school*

Box 4: TAs helping pupils deal with their emotions so they are able to learn

A headteacher in a small rural primary school with four mixed age classes highlights how a TA built a relationship with a child who struggled to express his emotions.

The child's parents had previously separated and then his father had passed away. The child displayed outbursts of anger and sometimes hurt his Year 2 classmates. This resulted in him often being removed from the classroom and not being able to access learning with his peers. However, a TA was able to form a positive relationship with the child, help him come to terms with his loss and better manage his emotions. The child is now in Year 4 and no longer has any behavioural issues.

The TA not only had an impact on his emotional development but also his academic ability; now the child can manage his emotions, he can focus on his schoolwork and has made significant progress in his learning and attainment.

Academic progress

Changes in pupils' behaviour and engagement can have significant impacts in terms of academic progress. Most leaders, teachers and TAs recognise that without the underlying social and emotional support they provide, some pupils cannot access the learning required for them to progress academically. One teacher described how teachers and TAs come together, combining their respective expertise, to meet pupils' academic and pastoral needs to drive improvement in outcomes. Many outcomes take months or years to materialise. For example, one TA described their work on a pupil's confidence that reduced their absenteeism and, by extension, improved the pupil's educational progress. Another TA talks about the progress children make in early years from learning to hold a pen to understanding phonics. This is a feature of the long-term difference TAs make through the relationships they build over time (for TAs who remain in their posts over the medium- to long-term). The social aspects of the role are also important as several TAs say improving pupils' confidence with learning and their peers

leads to better educational outcomes. Many TAs supporting pupils with complex needs note the rewards of pupil progression are significant because of the amount and duration of support they deliver.

They make a massive difference... You've got to view it as the teacher and the TA are a team working with that student with those particular needs, and through their expert knowledge of that one child and your pedagogy and your teaching approaches, you work together to get the best possible outcomes. – *Teacher, Secondary school*

This boy, he was Autistic, he was quite clever, but he just couldn't settle... I thought, let me see if I can give him this [music] lesson in this practice room. I taught him 'Baa, Baa, Black Sheep' and he got it in exactly one hour... [He was] never be interested in anything. And suddenly he's like, "I can do this." I don't know why, I just thought it was quite a victory that he just learnt something when everyone said he was impossible. But it actually wasn't. – *TA, Secondary school*

Above all, leaders, teachers and TAs strongly maintain that an additional member of teaching staff in a classroom helps to ensure that pupils understand the concepts being taught during lessons, reducing the likelihood of gaps in learning emerging.

If you're in a class of 30 and you've got one teacher, that teacher struggles to get around everybody. But when that teacher who has done their demonstration or their modelling or whatever they've done... having two people then going around and supporting everyone in the classroom, you're more likely to get to everybody and, therefore, you're more likely to have children actually understanding and having their queries or their misconceptions sorted. – *Leader, Primary school*

Some TAs can apply high level skills in their support which leaders say delivers strong pupil outcomes. A few secondary leaders consulted as part of the interviews employ TAs with degree-level subject qualifications (the TA survey found 46% of secondary TAs have a degree compared to 29% working in primary schools). These TAs were able to provide GCSE-level subject support in one-to-one and group situations. Leaders believed this support had a significant impact on pupil achievement as more than one adult in the class understood relevant topics to provide appropriate guidance and support.

Box 5: TAs enabling reception pupils to catch up through one-to-one support

One reception teacher in a two-form entry primary school uses their TAs to provide one-to-one support. There are 31 pupils in her class and approximately half are pupils with SEND. The TAs provide the stipulated support to the pupils with SEND alongside one-to-one activity targeted at pupils who did not attend nursery or have the opportunity to develop basic literacy and numeracy skills before joining school.

She describes how children who do not have an early grounding in these key skills can become aware by Year 2 that they are not progressing as quickly in their learning as their peers. They become anxious as a result. Through targeted support from the TAs, these children are provided with the tools to count, read, write and learn phonics. The one-to-one support from the same TA helps to build a strong relationship enabling the children to make rapid and sustained progress.

As a result of the TAs support, these pupils by Year 1 have made sufficient progress to participate in core lessons alongside their peers. The reception teacher believes this significantly improves their overall experience of school.

Attendance

Improved attendance among pupils as a result of the behaviour and engagement work undertaken by TAs was referenced by a small number of leaders. This relates to both school attendance through a reduction in the number of suspensions and accommodating pupils in class rather than in separate areas of the school. This has a direct impact on academic progress.

The TAs I have here... will invest that time and energy in getting them [the pupils they support] into the classroom, so it does benefit the children from a relationship point of view, having a relationship with a trusted adult other than their parents. It also benefits their attendance, so the social skills are there, the attendance is there, and we all know that if kids attend school they do better than when they don't. So, getting them in is half the battle. – *Leader, Secondary school*

I worked with a child who refused to come into school and over time [I] built up a relationship with him, and it got to the point where he was coming into school every day. He was accessing the lessons exactly the same as everybody else. – *TA, Primary school*

Teacher workload

The leaders interviewed discussed the impact of TAs on the workload of teachers, although they were more likely to describe their impact in terms of pupil engagement. This mirrors the mixed views observed in relation to workload in the leader survey. Those who discussed this tended to describe the importance of TAs for teachers in their role more generally rather than cite specific ways in which they help manage workload.

I don't think a teacher could do their job without them. – *Leader, Primary school*

Teachers were more likely to reference the positive impact of TAs in terms of their workload despite being under similar pressures, as identified by some of those interviewed. Teachers describe the increased expectations of them in their role owing to the demands of the curriculum. TAs play a vital role in helping them manage this workload. Further, they assume responsibility for functions that would be undertaken by teachers if they were not in post. This is reflected in the changing responsibilities for TAs described. Some TAs discussed the increasing workload of teachers and sought to offer support where possible to alleviate pressure. Teachers and TAs with trusted working relationships can work collaboratively to manage workload more effectively. A small number of teachers stated that schools would be required to close if TAs went on strike.

When the teacher strikes happened, I said to our SLT, 'If the teachers go on strike we can manage this, but if the TAs go on strike, we can't.' – *Teacher, Primary school*

My class teacher will decide what I do in the class... She has an awful lot on her because she's the science lead. She's also a mentor for trainee teachers, so she has a lot to do so I'll try to support her. – *TA, Primary school*

What makes TAs effective in their role

Leaders and teachers discussed key skills and characteristics that make TAs effective in their role. This includes their personal attributes and training and qualifications.

Personal attributes and character

The attributes most frequently cited by leaders and teachers irrespective of phase include the ability to develop positive relationships with both pupils and teachers, use their initiative to progress tasks with minimum supervision, and be flexible and adaptable in their role. Traits such as empathy, patience and resilience are strongly valued by most leaders as they are fundamental to the above attributes. These are prioritised above training and qualifications as these can be learned on the job. TAs facing extreme

behavioural circumstances need the mental fortitude to manage challenging situations. TAs encountering fewer of these situations still need the skills to recognise, manage and diffuse situations in the class that would otherwise cause disruption.

[I'm after TAs with] empathy, patience, big curiosity, resilience... I need them to get into the head as much as one can of a young person and to see the world through their eyes and be able to support them. – *Leader, Secondary school*

Higher-level knowledge, training and qualifications

Most leaders state that TAs with specialist skills, training or qualifications are desirable although they are of secondary importance to their personal attributes. Leaders describe a desire for both but, faced with recruitment challenges and a lack of suitable candidates, prioritise soft skills and personal qualities as prerequisites of the role.

In every job application, you put desirable experience of working with dyslexic or ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder] students or whatever, but beggars can't be choosers. Sometimes if you said it was essential, you'd miss out on some absolutely brilliant learning teaching assistants. – *Leader, Secondary school*

Many leaders place value in classroom experience. Primary leaders especially value the flexibility that TAs with classroom-experience offer for providing short-term lesson cover. Leaders value teaching skills when filling TA positions because the quality of expert pedagogical or teaching knowledge in the class is higher compared to TAs without such experience. However, leaders struggle to recruit these individuals and no leader said pre-existing educational skills were essential in TAs because they could learn whilst working.

Some of them [are] quite experienced TAs, so they had been with us for years and know their stuff. So, to go through the [HLTA] qualification was really useful for them and they said it galvanised some of the things that they knew unofficially, but it actually taught them and put a proper foundation to it. Even the SEND module. Just learning about special needs and learning about behaviours and things. They kind of knew it but it almost framed it for them... some of those greyer areas at the edges of their knowledge, it kind of firmed that up. – *Leader, All through special school*

Some TAs and leaders talk about the value of teaching qualifications for the role. Former teachers understand teaching theory and the dynamics of a classroom. Leaders feel former teachers are well equipped to identify potential issues as they arise in the classroom and/or recognise children's behaviours, mannerisms or characteristics which signal they are struggling with learning. They also understand classroom dynamics and

apply those in the one-to-one and group support they provide. Leaders and TAs think applying these skills improves the learning environment and increases pupils' knowledge acquisition.

Leaders say that specialist subject knowledge acquired through degree-level study is valuable for learning support in secondary schools. Secondary TAs and leaders describe how subject specialist knowledge adds value to lessons because TAs understand the concept behind topics, which makes them well placed to explain and demonstrate those concepts to pupils.

Leaders deem qualifications in subjects like educational psychology and childcare to be valuable for TAs working with pupils with SEND. This specialist knowledge helps TAs to understand different types of educational needs or disability and the theoretical basis for support interventions. Several leaders say TAs with such qualifications start contributing to pupils' learning quickly and soon prove their worth in classes. Some use this knowledge to connect with uncommunicative pupils and understand their behavioural triggers, or support conditions such as diabetes, autism spectrum disorders or ADHD. TAs that recognise the way in which educational needs show with pupils are also valued because they can adapt their approach autonomously. Similarly, SEND qualifications provide TAs with practical tools to manage pupil learning and behaviour leaving the teacher to concentrate on delivering lessons. TAs with these skills can hold extra responsibilities, such as emotional and mental health support. Whilst leaders value individuals with these higher-level qualifications, they struggle to recruit TAs with these credentials. Only a minority of those interviewed have appointed TAs with these qualifications in their schools.

The importance of teacher and TA relationships

Teachers and TAs talked about the importance of an effective working relationship and the need for mutual respect. This includes clarity about roles and responsibilities, strong verbal and non-verbal communication, and the ability to work collaboratively to deliver lessons. Both teachers and TAs report that relationships are most successful when they can input into the planning of the lesson for the pupils they are supporting. This could include short discussions about an upcoming lesson, its objectives and what the teacher will cover. Planning also means identifying the right learning activities for a pupil, or strategies to recognise and then manage triggers for behaviour that will disrupt learning. TAs also communicate pupils' progress to the teacher during a lesson, or over a longer period.

Sometimes if your teacher's struggling a little bit, maybe there's been a behaviour issue, you're there to step in to help, to read what your teacher needs at that moment. – *TA, Secondary school*

We can communicate by just a glance now... we've got to the point where we know if we're going to have to guide a child out of the classroom, or if we're going to have to catch a chair, or anything that's going to happen. We can do it all with looks. – *TA, Special school*

However, the boundary between the role of the teacher and TA depends on the individuals involved. The experience of both the TA and teacher affects this, and teachers express different preferences for working with TAs. Teachers want TAs that can adapt to these preferences. This is one reason why leaders and teachers value TAs who can work flexibly within a team structure. Teachers described wanting TAs to recognise the mannerisms and behaviours of a child that is struggling to learn to act accordingly and take cues from the lesson plan to deliver a pre-planned learning intervention.

Some TAs report occasionally supporting inexperienced teachers to settle into their roles by offering advice and guidance. These TAs know their classes and the pupils they support, so they can offer invaluable support to teachers new to a school or the profession.

I've been in schools for longer than the ECTs [early career teachers] so I think my experience did help. I did give advice and I would help the teachers out. Because it is their first year, they've just recently stepped in. – *TA, Primary school*

Some leaders are of the view that clearer guidance on roles and responsibilities and consistency in job descriptions will help to provide a clearer demarcation. Only a minority of teachers interviewed have received training about how to deploy TAs in the classroom. For one secondary school teacher, this included a compulsory session ran by the local authority. Others described informal professional development delivered by senior leaders in the school. A leader of a secondary school stated that all teachers received training about how to deploy TAs as part of their SEND review. Some leaders believe that more training is required to facilitate the effective use of TAs. This is especially true for ECTs, with some leaders noting that they use TAs less effectively. These leaders say some teachers need time to develop working relationships and effective practices to get the most from the TA.

As a teacher I've had absolutely zero training on how to manage a TA, work with a TA. You just do it on the job. – *Teacher, Special school*

Instances of less effective TA deployment

A minority of teachers describe practices where TAs are less effective but reiterated their value in the classroom despite this. Disengagement and a lack of underlying academic knowledge (especially in primary schools and for maths) are the basis for teachers' concerns. A small number report experiencing working with TAs that have difficulty following the flow of the lesson or identifying pupils that need help. Further, a minority of TAs appointed to work with pupils on a one-to-one basis can be reluctant to go beyond this remit. Section 3.7 describes how some leaders manage their recruitment processes to increase the likelihood of recruiting engaged and capable TAs.

Sometimes you get TAs who will basically just decide [their job] is to support that one child, but there are times when you might need them to step in and help out with another child. At times they might be a bit reluctant, and you might have to, 'Come and help me out here a bit. I need your support.' They might not do that. Luckily, I've never been in that situation, but I know teaching colleagues who have. –

Teacher, Secondary school

Disrespectful behaviour is experienced by some TAs from other school staff. They think the root cause is a poor perception of their role and purpose from other staff or external bodies. These TAs report feelings of powerlessness or unrealistic expectations of their responsibilities in relation to pay.

A few other TAs and leaders note the wider policy and political environment does not respect the contribution TAs make to pupils' progress and learning. This is most often expressed in relation to poor pay and working conditions relative to the high importance of TA support. A couple of interviewees also think that public and government perceptions of TAs contribute to negative perceptions of their role in schools.

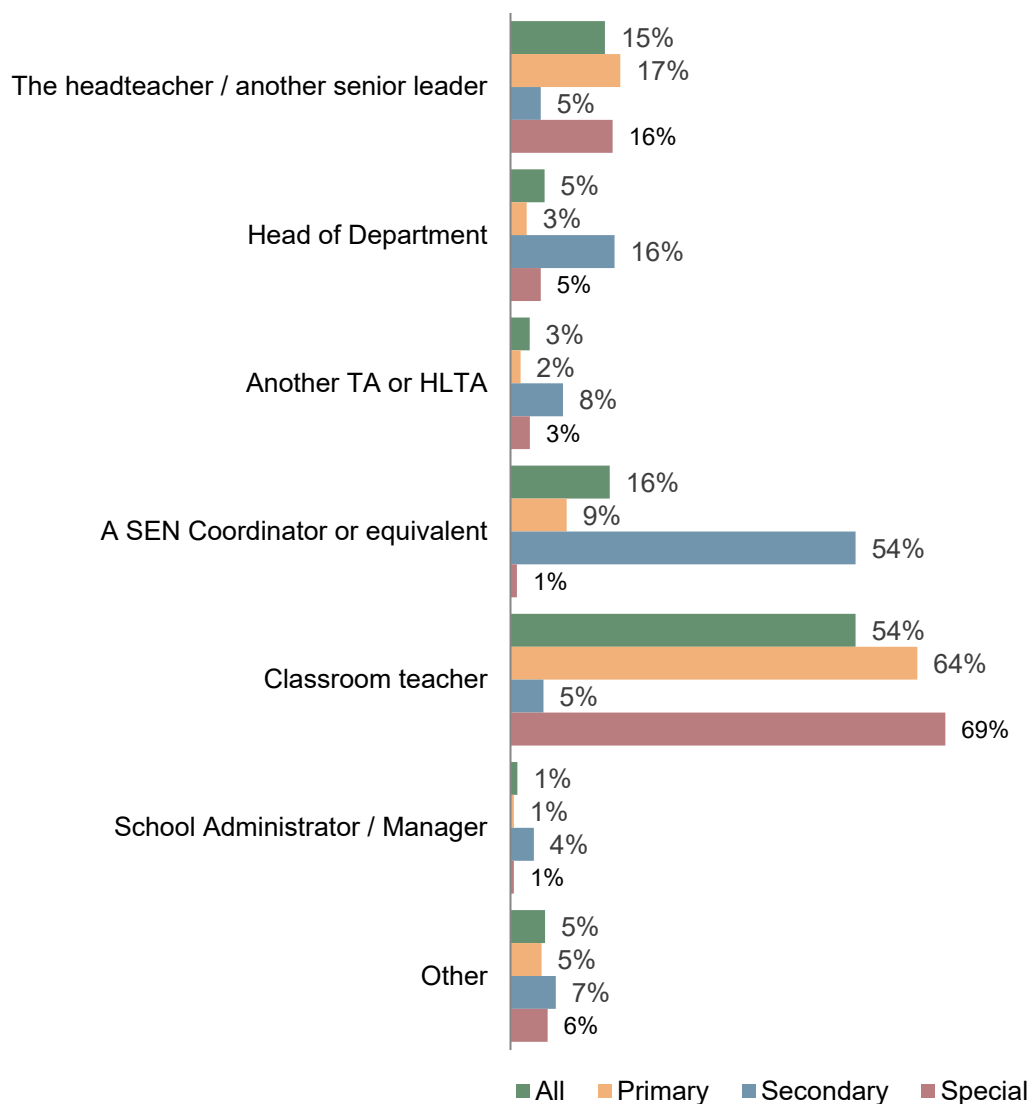
Managerial factors

This section explores which staff in schools manage the work of TAs at both a school and classroom level, how they receive feedback on their performance, and the types of training and professional development undertaken.

Monitoring and managing TAs

Around two-thirds of TAs in primary (64%) and special (69%) settings said their work is allocated by the classroom teacher. The proportion in secondary settings was 5%. Instead, secondary TAs said their work was more likely set by a SENCo (54%), Head of Department (16%) or other TA/HLTA (8%) (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Who generally allocates what work TAs do on a day-to-day basis



Source: TA survey. Base: 2,715

The interviews provide further insight, highlighting how the management of TAs varies not only by phase but school size and leadership style. How they are deployed by schools also influences their management. For example, leaders think some managerial input from teaching professionals is necessary when TAs are used for cover supervision in primary and special settings.

The interviews show it is very common for more than one person to manage different aspects of TA work. A leader typically manages the overall deployment of all TAs in a school based on the characteristics of the pupil cohort and the skills of the whole team. Deployment will change as new pupils enter the school each year, as TAs leave and join, as their skills improve through staff development and with changes to leadership positions. The size of the school, the number of TAs and/or the phase of operations will influence which leader makes these choices. In smaller schools (especially primaries),

the head is the decision-maker. Another member of the senior leadership team (SLT) or a SENCo is typically responsible in larger primaries and secondary schools. Larger multi-academy trusts (MATs) may have an individual who considers TA staffing issues at the Trust level. A couple of MATs deployed TAs between sites to cover staff absences.

So, the [HLTAs] are slightly separate. The rest are all managed by my SENCo and her team, so she has essentially myself and the SENCo manager who meet with them every morning, who appraise them. – *Leader, Secondary school*

As special schools and secondaries with higher proportions of pupils with SEND employ a larger ratio of TAs to teachers with a range of specialist skills, leaders will structure teams to reflect their school's characteristics. Separate teaching support departments are often run by a member of the SLT and/or the SENCo. Others distribute TAs into academic departments and manage TAs through the departmental head with support from a SENCo. Others use a hybrid model mixing a central management structure for some TAs with broad responsibilities with department-based TAs. The structures are all based on how leaders think they can best manage the TA resources in their school to effectively meet the needs of pupils.

Effective communication and openness are the features of the good management practices that TAs mention. Communication covers clear, consistent guidance from other staff when it is needed, clear expression of how TAs activities helps pupils, good listening from managers and responding to TAs questions and queries. Several TAs also commend the supportive environment of their school and say they are comfortable going to teachers and leaders for advice. In several schools, TAs described management structures that were in place to communicate regularly so the wider SLT understand what is happening around the school although these mechanisms are not always perfect.

Most TAs and leaders think the number of different managers can mean the support and development needs and requirements of the TA get lost. Some interviewees connect this to differences in expectations between managers. The consequences are conflicting direction or priorities between managers towards the TAs work and role.

Personalities also play a part when TAs and their managers do not get on, and/or want to take different approaches to task. Ineffective communication occurs where a TA and their manager do not work together well. TAs who are dissatisfied with their role often explain challenges they are facing with their management, describing hierarchical staffing structures in which they are told what to do by teaching staff without consideration of their ideas. These TAs say their views are not valued and they cannot work to their initiative.

That's down to personalities. A lot of staff feel very unsupported here at this school, including TAs and support staff. So the senior leadership team will walk past the TAs and not even say hello or

acknowledge them and some don't even know their names. – *TA, Secondary school*

Feedback on performance

The school leader survey showed leaders use a lot of evidence to aid their decision-making on how to use TAs. Most leaders said they used the experiences of teachers/SENCOs working in the school (85%), pupil progress reports/assessment data (78%) and EEF guidance (73%). Two-thirds (69%) also used internal feedback from staff and pupils and three-in-five (58%) sought external advice from inclusion consultants, SEND reviews or post-Ofsted advice.

In interviews, leaders report using a range of evidence when collecting feedback on TA performance. However, strong preferences were present depending on the professional outlook of the leader. Learning walks (brief classroom visits to collect observational evidence) are a good example. Many leaders apply the same methods they use to gather data on teachers for TAs and said they used learning walks for both teachers and TAs. However, a few others feel learning walks are ineffective measurement tools as practice alters under observation.

Methods for collecting feedback on TAs (and teachers) differ between schools and were dependent on factors like the attitudes of the leader or SLT, the level of SEND and/or disadvantage in the school and available budgets. Several leaders articulate clear management practices and procedures for the school that also applied to TAs. These leaders connected why they collected feedback (the current target school and pupil outcomes) to data collection methods, how that data was used and what happened as a result. Other leaders less-clearly express the purpose and feedback processes. This means collecting feedback is less about the TA role and more about following the wider management processes employed by the individual school.

Overall, the evidence shows that the performance management tools used for TAs do not vary much to those used for teachers. For example, 78% of TAs reported receiving performance reviews – a finding supported by the leaders interviewed who state TAs get feedback from line managers and teachers on what they can improve. This evidence is sometimes used to identify suitable professional development activity for TAs.

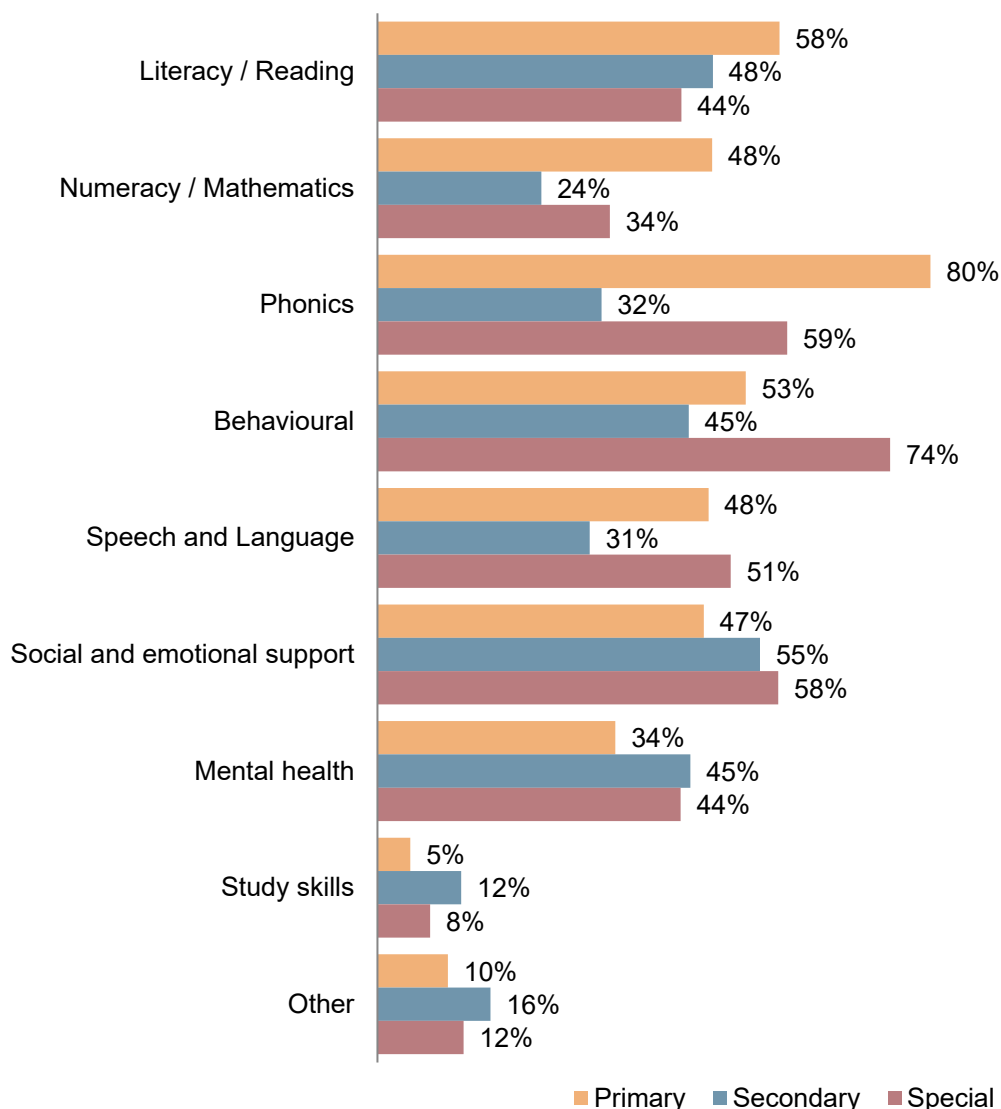
Training and developing TAs

Training or professional development undertaken by TAs

Whilst the majority (67%) of TAs receive training to deliver targeted interventions, there is a clear distinction in the types of interventions TAs had received training in by phase (Figure 9). Primary TAs were more likely to receive training relating to literacy and numeracy (including phonics) whereas TAs working in secondary settings were more

likely to train in social and emotional support and mental health. Training in behavioural management was more common for TAs working in special schools.

Figure 9: Types of targeted interventions TAs have received training for



Source: TA survey. Base: 2,715

The factors that influence decisions about training relate to management practices and budgets rather than phase. Some leaders gave passive responses to questions about training, outlining the challenges they face when sourcing and paying for training and professional development. For example, some say tight school budgets restrict their offer of training. Some TAs also think budgets are the reason why they do not access training.

I've said about training and stuff before and it's never really happened. I know there are all the funding issues and we're really struggling with that at the moment. – TA, Primary school

Other leaders describe how they circumvent barriers to ensure TAs develop professionally. Leaders and TAs report using sources of free training on a range of relevant topics (pedagogical practice, subject-specific such as literacy and maths, generalised SEND topics, etc.) and paid for training in more specialist areas including Makaton sign language, medical awareness and training pertaining to SEND and behavioural management approaches such as Team Teach. Where possible, leaders send one or two TAs on a course and then ask them to cascade the learning to other TAs and teachers in the school. A couple of leaders mention subscriptions as a way of meeting their professional development needs.

Well, they're contracted to stay on a Wednesday, so every other week we have CPD that we do internally and that will cover everything. Online safety, curriculum, etc. We've got phonics this week, we've got online safety coming the week after, there'll be positive behaviour support. We also did a pilot with some [educational psychologists] on something called Emotionally Able Targeting. We have external people who come in, we might have a Makaton refresher session. So, we have a programme of training, which is face to face, but we also have bought into... an online training programme. – *Leader, Special school*

Some leaders invite TAs to appropriate inset days on topics like behavioural practice, supporting pupil development and teacher support activities such as marking. Leaders typically paid TAs for any extra time needed to attend inset training sessions.

Some leaders offer training and professional development as a way to show the TAs they are valued, in place of being able to offer them more pay. Most senior leaders expressed their need to train TAs to be more of a specialist because of the increase in number of pupils who are neurodiverse or have specific and/or complex needs.

Most TAs interviewed referred to the internal professional development that they have undertaken and about a third cited specialist SEND training, such as 'Understanding Autism', 'Pathological Demand Avoidance' and other trauma informed training. This is particularly prevalent in special schools, but primary and secondary schools are also increasingly providing access to training because of the greater number of pupils with additional needs. Some schools (especially primaries) are recruiting TAs who can train to become Emotional Literacy Support Assistants or THRIVE practitioners (designed to help schools improve children and young people's wellbeing throughout the setting, ensuring their healthy development and increasing their ability to learn).

Nearly all TAs say statutory training in areas such as pupil safeguarding is provided by their school to cover legal requirements. This training is typically delivered through online methods such as webinars and often incurs little or no cost for the school.

Some TAs undertake professional development in their own time and, in limited cases, at their own expense. These TAs choose to train through interest rather than necessity as they want to learn more about a given topic or learn something to improve the support they give to pupils.

Interest in professional development and training

Two-thirds (65%) of surveyed TAs were interested in training for targeted interventions, although interest declined with experience. For example, three-quarters of TAs with up to 5 years' experience were interested in training in literacy, phonics or maths (74%) or training relating to SEND interventions (76%). This figure fell for TAs with 5 years or more experience to 60% and 61% respectively, although this still represents three-in-five TAs.

TAs mention interest in a variety of professional development topics including behaviour management, counselling, SEND conditions and strategies to improve the support given to children. For example, a couple of TAs want to know more about why pupils behave poorly so they can improve the support they provide to pupils.

[The training of interest is] probably more to do with self-esteem and counselling and that kind of stuff. Because a lot of times you're in [a position] and you don't know what to say from a practice point of view, what's going to be most supportive for the children. Sometimes you're really caught off guard with things that they say to you and [do not know] how best to respond. – *TA, Primary school*

When TAs say they want professional development, several discussed activities that will help them progress as a TA, or into another school role such as teaching (several were potentially interested in ITT). However, they also note that progression opportunities within the TA role and/or pay scale are limited. As mentioned previously, the pay range for TAs is narrow and many feel it does not adequately reflect the contemporary duties of TAs (see issues with retention in the next section). A few TAs therefore question the value of professional development to progress in a TA career.

The survey found more than half of TAs (54%) were not at all interested in becoming a teacher. This feeling was strongest amongst more experienced TAs and those without an undergraduate degree. TAs with five or more years' experience were more likely to say that they are not at all interested (63%) compared to those with less experience (37%); the same is true for TAs without a degree (60%) compared to those with a degree (38%). Some leaders and TAs interviewed think the TA role is a good pathway into teaching because TAs get an excellent insight into the classroom environment. However, few of the TAs who took part in an interview express interest in becoming a teacher. Many (including most ex-teachers) say the TA role provides the satisfaction of watching pupils progress without the workload stress they associate with teaching. A few TAs without a

degree-level qualification think they cannot enter teacher training without such a qualification, so do not consider teaching an option.

Recruiting and retaining TAs

This section considers the challenges to the recruitment and retention of TAs and the measures that some leaders are implementing to address these.

Challenges to recruitment

Three-quarters (75%) of leaders taking part in the survey found it either 'fairly' or 'extremely' difficult to recruit TAs; secondary school leaders found it especially difficult (82%). Retention was less of a concern, but still difficult for under a third (29%) of leaders and the challenges were again greater for secondary leaders (47%) compared to those leading primary schools (25%).

Nearly all leaders say they recruit non-specialist TAs based on their character rather than their qualifications. Most leaders interviewed find TA recruitment challenging, citing issues with the number and quality of applicants. Nine-in-ten (89%) leaders said they struggled to recruit TAs with the desired level of skills.

Skills gaps

Skills gaps were highlighted as recruitment issues both in the leaders survey and interviews. Of those who found recruitment difficult (75% of leaders), nine-in-ten (89%) said they struggled to recruit TAs with the desired level of skills. The specific skills asked about in the survey were specialist SEND skills, for which four-in-five leaders (81%) found it difficult to recruit, and specific learning skills such as phonics, maths and literacy. Nearly half (45%) of leaders found it difficult to recruit TAs with these skills.

Leaders also discussed skills gaps in interviews. For leaders, the skills that are hard to find during recruitment include those relating to general support for pupils with SEND in mainstream schools, and specific or complex SEND needs in special schools. Leaders value candidates with qualifications or experience in relevant topics and define skills as competences gained through experience and/or qualifications. Qualifications do not necessarily mean those specific to educational settings. Anything transferable from medical, psychological or care backgrounds has value for leaders recruiting TAs for SEND positions. For example, one leader mentioned prior candidates with a nursing background are valuable where pupils have medical or mental health needs. Similarly, childcare and nursery qualifications offer transferable skills in some settings, especially nursery to Key Stage 1.

Several leaders ideally want GCSE level English and maths, but candidates do not always possess these qualifications. Leaders say a TA with poor maths and literacy skills

will deliver less impact on pupil progression and outcomes. Lacking these skills does not mean the leader refuses to employ the TA. A few say they will recruit as long as the individual is willing to learn or develop their skills.

[TAs] have to have at least a C at GCSE or Grade 4 now for English and maths. One [TA] is currently training to be an HLTA; she's brilliant at her job but she [had a Grade D] maths GCSE. So, I said, "I'm going to take you on, but I'm going to put you through your maths GCSE, you're going to get that C and that's what we're going to do. So, I'll put you on a temporary contract until we get you through that GCSE and then you can have a permanent contract" ... She's now absolutely flying, she's brilliant, she's one of my Year 6 LPSAs [Learning and Pastoral Support Assistant]. – *Leader, Primary school*

School factors

Several leaders said a feature of their location or school made it difficult to recruit. A few rural primary schools said potential TAs do not want to travel too far which limited the local supply of potential recruits. Childcare was also a reason why distance was a challenge for TAs with children. Some leaders think TA roles are useful for working parents as they can fit the role around childcare; a long commute negates this benefit for parents.

A couple of leaders say a poor Ofsted rating influences interest in TA (and teaching) positions because TAs may think school behaviour or management practices are poor. Leaders think this discourages applications for TA (and teaching) positions at the school.

A few leaders adopted new management and administrative practices to improve recruitment. For example, one leader has a rolling advert for TA staff and recruits all year round. Another leader in a large secondary school now recruits earlier in the year than everybody else to increase their candidate pool. This leader estimates the number of TAs who are likely to leave each year to recruit replacements early. Although there is a cost implication, it does mean that the TAs currently in role can help train new TAs so they are ready to work effectively as soon as the new academic year begins. To be effective, both policies require staff turnover amongst a relatively large TA workforce.

We have got 30 people that are responding to the advert this week [late November]. If we appoint them before Christmas... the earliest they'll be with us is February [which given they need a training window] they'll be ready in the summer term, so we've got capacity to then lose those [the TAs we estimate] we're eventually going to lose. We've shifted our whole recruitment earlier in the year to enable us to be fully staffed at the time when we need to be fully staffed rather than [going] half a year then without having the appropriately trained

and equipped staff to support the students. – *Leader, Secondary school*

Another leader in a smaller primary school pre-interviewed any prospective TA by supervising them interact with children in a class. She would only interview people who showed empathy and patience towards the children.

Challenges to retention

The survey found low pay was a key reason why some TAs considered leaving the role. Those TAs interviewed emphasise that they remain in the job despite their pay and cite the satisfaction they achieve through making direct impacts on pupils' lives. However, several leaders stated that they lose TAs to a range of other less challenging roles that offer higher salaries. Aside from the principle of fairness, not paying TAs much more for their wider responsibilities could also affect retention. Leaders note that they would struggle to find budget to pay TAs more based on their current budgets.

Most leaders think the TA pay scale and their support budgets do not now reflect changes to the TA role over the past years, nor recognise the value of the most highly skilled and knowledgeable TAs. A couple of leaders reference differentiated pay scales for nurses compared to support staff in the NHS, drawing an analogy between the stronger educational skills of TAs compared to other school support staff.

There was a really interesting paper that was shared with me by Lancashire County Council, which really defines a clarity around, [the] specific school and our medical needs that we have to support... It breaks [TA's activities] down by task and actually talks about invasive and non-invasive procedures... [TAs have] all got quite a generic job description... I would like a clarity on their job description that matches day-to-day tasks that is graduated to match what happens in school and is also paid as it would be in other sectors, such as the NHS. – *Leader, Special school*

Several leaders and TAs believe the commitment of effective TAs can be taken for granted. These interviews feel TAs take some of the strain of increasing school-level workload and that wider responsibilities eventually impact on retention because the number of staff does not match the volume of work. Several interviewees feel low staffing levels has a deleterious effect on pupil outcomes and progression.

Addressing challenges in recruitment and retention

Whilst TAs are broadly satisfied in their role, only half (50%) were satisfied with opportunities to progress. Secondary school TAs were less satisfied than others in this regard (40%). Limited opportunities to progress and low pay were the main reasons

given by those TAs who were thinking about leaving the role. Two-thirds (64%) of TAs agreed they felt valued in their job for the work they do, although this varies by phase: 58% of TAs in secondary and special schools agree compared to 67% in primary.

Leaders are in a difficult position with respect to TA retention. They feel they have little room for manoeuvre on pay and any offer they can give for skills is relatively minimal. Leaders and TAs also recognise comparative pay in other jobs is higher. Progression opportunities differ markedly by individual schools and leaders think there is no sectoral agreement or career path for TAs that recognises the variety and breadth of responsibilities TAs now hold.

Many leaders rely on factors like work-life balance and a lower level of associated work stress compared to professional teaching to retain TAs. However, the shift of some activities from teachers to TAs does increase work-related stress for some TAs and some leaders raise concerns this will affect retention.

A few leaders consider retention from a different angle and adjust their employment strategy to account for turnover in TA roles. They make active choices to recruit a wider variety of TAs with different skills to meet the needs of pupils (see Box 6). However, these strategies are not open to all. Smaller schools outside of larger urban areas face greater limits on recruitment and hence have limited options to retain good TAs.

Box 6: Alternative recruitment strategies for TAs

One school leader from a large secondary school describes the change in approach in their school. Their cohort of TAs used to predominantly be mothers whose children had grown up who then started volunteering with the school. The leadership felt professionalising TAs would improve pupil outcomes, so they now recruit from a much wider range of backgrounds. This includes recent graduates with subject and/or relevant experience and qualifications who can add to the subject knowledge available in classes. The school has TAs with degrees in physics, business and science, and ex-professionals who can build good relationships with pupils.

The leader recognises that most highly qualified TAs will not stay more than a few years before moving on but say their work is mutually beneficial to both parties. The school recruits knowledgeable people who add variety and depth to their TA pool whilst the TA gets valuable work experience to help them in their subsequent careers. The leader recognises that their entire cohort of TAs cannot be “high-fliers” and a cohort of more experienced and long-term TAs is essential to the school and some pupils’ wellbeing. He feels a diverse TA group also provides energy and colour to the school and delivers significant benefits to pupils’ academic outcomes.

Appendix 1: Interview guides

Leader interview guide

Introduction

1. Please start by telling me about yourself and your current leadership role?
 - a. What specific responsibilities do you have regarding teaching assistants?
2. Can you tell me a little about your school and the surrounding area?
 - a. The structure of the school – is it part of a multi-academy trust (MAT), etc.,
 - b. Ofsted rating [must record]
 - c. Wider socio-economic conditions in the catchment area
 - d. Eligibility and take up of free school meals

Roles of teaching assistants in the school

3. Can you describe the range of roles and responsibilities held by teaching assistants in your school?
 - a. ALLOW RESPONDENT TO ANSWER THEN PROMPT IF NECESSARY:
 - i. ALWAYS PROMPT ON: General classroom / learning / teaching roles
 - ii. Targeted, one-to-one and specialist support
 - iii. Other general, pastoral or administrative roles
4. Can you explain how you make decisions about what teaching assistants do, or do not do?
 - a. How do decisions differ depending on the range of roles undertaken by TAs in your school/Trust?
 - b. How do you differentiate what TAs do based on their experience or qualification level?
 - c. Under what circumstances might a TA undertake activities that would usually be undertaken by a professional teacher?
 - d. What are the specialist roles e.g., special educational needs undertaken by TAs? How do you assign these roles?
 - e. What role do pupil outcomes play when making decisions about deploying TAs? CHALLENGE HERE IF TAs FULFIL ROLES USUALLY FILLED BY PROFESSIONAL TEACHERS.
5. Has the number of TAs in your school/Trust increased, decreased or stayed the same over the past couple of years? What are the causes of any changes in numbers?
PROMPT IF NECESSARY:
 - a. Changes prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic

- b. Changes relating to the cost of living crisis
 - c. Difficulties in recruiting either TAs or teachers due to:
 - i. Where the school / Trust is located
 - ii. Other school characteristics (e.g., Ofsted)
 - iii. Subject area teacher shortages
 - iv. General pedagogical or classroom management skills
 - v. Specialist skills (relating to the following two list items)
 - d. Increases in pupils with special education needs and disabilities (SEND)
 - e. Increases in pupils with education health and care plans (EHCPs)
 - f. Changes to the number of pupils / class sizes / pupil behaviour at the school / Trust
 - g. The school / Trusts financial circumstances or changes to budgets.
6. Ideally, what is the right workforce balance between teaching assistants, professional teachers and other staff in your setting? Why does that balance work?
- a. How many teaching assistants is too many, and how few too few? Why do you think that?
 - b. What other resources do you need less of if teaching assistant numbers increase?
 - c. Conversely, what resources would you need more of if teaching assistant numbers decreased?
7. How do the roles of TAs complement and support the roles of professional teachers in your setting?
- a. How do TAs support primary/secondary/pupils in special schools settings?
 - b. How do TAs facilitate the professional work of teachers?
 - c. What heightened roles do higher-level / more qualified TAs fulfil?
8. What criteria do you take into account when planning the support work of TAs?
- a. Where do TAs fit into the school's operational planning?
 - b. Who decides how TAs are deployed in your school/trust? What role do teachers play in making these decisions?
9. Have the roles and responsibilities of TAs changed over the past few years? If so, how?
- a. What are the root causes of those changes? USE CHANGE PROMPT LIST (SEE Q5) AS NECESSARY
 - b. Can you give any examples of how roles have changed?
 - c. What has been the impact on pupils of these changes?

10. How do pupils benefit from the work of TAs in your school/Trust?

- a. Can you give examples of how good working relationships positively influence pupil outcomes and achievement?
- b. Conversely, what is the impact on pupils when teacher – TA relationships are weaker?

Managing teaching assistants

11. Can you describe the management processes your school/trust uses to line manage TAs?

- a. Who directly manages TAs?
 - i. Do TAs with more qualifications or experience manage / support other TAs? How do they do this?
- b. Why do you adopt this management approach?

12. How do you monitor and evaluate TAs contribution to the school? Can you provide examples of how you do this?

13. What training or guidance is in place for teachers to help them manage and/or deploy TAs?

- a. Who devised this guidance?
- b. How do monitor whether teachers follow this guidance correctly?

14. What feedback do you collect on TAs' performance?

- a. What evidence is used to support feedback?
- b. How is feedback used to improve the performance of TAs?
 - i. Individually; and
 - ii. As a group

Recruitment and retention

15. Can you talk me through the process of filling a TA vacancy?

- a. What formal and informal methods might you use to identify suitable candidates?
- b. What prior experience do you value when looking for a TA? Why is that experience valuable?
- c. Are any of your TAs former teachers? What are the reasons why they opt for a TA role rather than a teaching position?
- d. What qualifications or professional skills do you seek? Why are these qualifications and skills valuable?

16. What challenges, if any, do you face in filling TA roles?

- a. Are any issues to do with the quantity or quality of applicants? Why do you say that?

- b. What do you think are the reasons why these challenges exist?
 - c. How would you describe the supply and demand for TAs in your setting?
17. Has the cost-of-living crisis had any impact on the supply and demand for TA roles?
- a. What impact has your school/Trust directly felt on TA recruitment and retention due to the cost-of-living crisis?
 - b. What has your school/Trust done to counteract these impacts?
18. What wider staffing issues do you consider when recruiting TAs such as, for example, existing teaching vacancies?
- a. How does TA / higher-level TA recruitment and retention compare to that for teachers?
 - b. What are the various factors you take into account when:
 - i. Thinking about recruiting TAs?
 - ii. Thinking about retaining TAs?
19. What are the main reasons why TAs leave their roles?
- a. What other roles are TAs moving into?
 - b. Is there any difference in the destinations of higher-level TAs?
 - c. What systems do you have in place to retain TAs?
 - d. Are these systems effective in retaining TAs? Why do you think that way?
20. Do you have a career pathway for TAs to become teachers?
- a. Are any of your TAs currently in the process of becoming a teacher? Is this a well-trodden path in your school/Trust? What are the benefits to the school/Trust of developing TAs in this way?
 - b. Can you provide an example of when a TA has become a teacher? How did being a TA provide opportunities to learn the skills needed of professional teachers?
 - c. Are there any drawbacks of using TA roles as a pipeline into professional teaching? Why do you think this?

Developing teaching assistants

21. What are the most important skills you look for in teaching assistants?
- a. ALLOW THE PARTICIPANT TO RESPOND. PROMPTS IF NEEDED:
 - i. Teaching or pedagogical skills
 - ii. Specialist support / SEND / EHCP / behaviour management
 - iii. Softer interpersonal and emotional skills
22. How important are TA-specific qualifications? What are the benefits to the school and to pupils?
- a. How many of your TAs have specific qualifications for the role?

- b. What is the mix of teaching, specialist and general skills held by TAs? Is this balance right? Why do you say that?
- c. What specific qualifications for higher-level TAs hold?
- d. Views on TA apprenticeships and their use
- e. What other qualifications do your TAs hold?

23. What training and professional development is available to TAs working in your school/Trust?

- a. PROBE ON: Who provides this professional development? Why do you use this provision?
- b. Which training / development pathways are most important for your school/Trust? Why is that?
- c. How do you assess the quality of professional development offered to TAs?
- d. How willing are TAs to take on training opportunities? What affects their willingness to train?
- e. What is the impact of training and professional development on TA performance and retention?

24. What specialist training (for example SEND training) is provided to TAs?

- a. How does this training help alleviate any challenges in recruiting TAs with specialist skills?

25. IF NO TRAINING OFFERED: Why is your school/Trust unable to offer professional development to TAs?

- a. What are the barriers to offering training?
- b. To what extent is offering no training or development a choice? Can you describe the reasons behind that decision?

26. What professional training and TA staff development works particularly well in your context? Why are these approaches effective?

Financial aspects of employing teaching assistants

27. Where do teaching assistants fit within the wider financial management of the school/Trust?

- a. How has the budget for TAs / higher-level TAs changed over the past few years? What are the main drivers for these changes?
- b. How do TAs help you balance wider staffing costs, including employing professional teachers?
- c. What are the savings and costs associated with employing TAs?

28. How factors influence the amount you pay TAs?

- a. How does pay vary between TAs?
 - i. PROMPTS: By knowledge / qualifications / experience

ii. By specialist skills

b. How, if at all, do these challenges differ to those you face filling professional teaching positions?

Closing thoughts

29. Thinking about everything we discussed, could TAs be used more effectively, and are there any barriers to making better use of TAs?

30. What are the key thoughts you want me to take back to the Department for Education about teaching assistants?

31. Thank you. At the start of the interview, I said we would ask your permission to pass on an anonymised transcript of this interview to the Department of Education for their internal analysis. You are under no obligation to give this permission. Can we pass a transcript on to DfE?

Teaching assistant guide

Introduction

1. Please start by telling me about yourself and your current role as a teaching assistant.
 - a. Please summarise the general responsibilities of your post.
 - b. How long have you been working in the role? What did you do before becoming a teaching assistant?
 - i. IF FORMERLY A TEACHER: What were your main reasons for leaving the teaching profession?
 - c. What qualifications do you hold that are relevant to the teaching assistant role?
2. Can you tell me a little about your school and the surrounding area?
 - a. The structure of the school – is it part of a multi-academy trust (MAT), etc.,
 - b. Ofsted rating [must record]
 - c. Wider socio-economic conditions in the catchment area
 - d. Eligibility and take up of free school meals

What the teaching assistant does in the school

3. How does your role complement and support the roles of professional teachers in your school/Trust?
 - a. How do you support teaching and learning in the classroom? How does this support vary by class or pupils?
 - b. How, if at all, do you work with teachers to decide how to spend your time in the classroom?
 - c. How would you describe your typical working relationship with teachers? Why do you say that?
 - d. What examples of very good working practice with teachers can you recall?
4. Do you provide cover supervision for teacher absences? What support are you offered to help deliver?
 - a. What are the main reasons why you have to step in to fulfil some professional teaching tasks?
5. How do you think pupils benefit from your work? Why do you think that?
 - a. What is the mix of support you give between one-to-one, targeted support to individuals, support to small groups of pupils, support for whole classes or different types of pupil support?
 - b. How does your work help pupils progress in their learning? What types of contribution are you proud of regarding pupils' progression?
 - c. Similarly, what connections do you make between your work and pupils' achievement?

- d. What influence do you think you have on pupils' behaviour? Why do you think this?
6. Can you describe how you support pupils with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND)?
- a. What are the comparative benefits pupils gain between wider classroom support and more targeted support?
 - b. How do you tailor support for different pupils? How (if at all) does tailoring support work? Can you offer some examples?
 - c. Which parts of the role are valued most by your pupils? And what are the characteristics of the pupils who derive the most value? Why do you think these pupils think this way?
7. What sort of other support, if any, do you provide to pupils or other staff outside of the classroom?
- a. INTERVIEW: PROMPT AS REQUIRED:
 - i. Catch-up tutoring support outside of the classroom?
 - ii. Wraparound cover or supporting extracurricular activities?
 - iii. Administrative tasks?
 - iv. Liaising with parents or families?
 - b. Why are you asked to fulfil these roles rather than others in the school?
 - c. What support is provided to you to help with these aspects of your role?
8. ASK FOR TAs WITH THREE OR MORE YEARS' EXPERIENCE: How, if at all, have your responsibilities changed over the past few years?
- a. IF THEIR ROLE HAS CHANGED: Why do you think your role has changed? What have others in the school said about this?
 - b. How has the school/Trust supported you in any new responsibilities?
 - c. What has been the impact on pupils of any changes to your role?

Line management

9. What is the role of the person who manages your work? What aspects of your role do they manage? PROBE ON MANAGEMENT BY HEADS OF YEAR, SUBJECT LEADS (SECONDARY), SENIOR MANAGERS, SEND SPECIALISTS, HIGH-LEVEL TEACHING ASSISTANTS.
- a. Does anybody else supervise any of your activities?
 - b. What aspects of the way you are managed work best? Can you provide an example?
 - c. How could the school/Trust improve the way you are managed?
10. How are you asked to feedback on your performance as a teaching assistant?
- a. What evidence is used to support feedback?

- b. Do teachers have time set aside to liaise with you about your role? How is this time organised and managed?
- c. What happens after feedback is given?
 - i. Are objectives or development plans put in place?
 - ii. If so, how is performance towards targets measured? What happens when you meet your objectives?

Professional development activities

11. How confident are you in your teaching assistant role?

- a. What do you think are your key strengths in your teaching assistant role?
 - i. Why do you think these parts of your role are a strength?
 - ii. Can TA's specialise in your areas of strength and what would be the benefits to pupils of specialising?
- b. Conversely, are there any skills or knowledge you would like to improve?
 - i. How do you feel about developing any of these skills or knowledge?

12. What, if any, training or professional development have you undertaken in the past year? IF NONE: Have you ever undertaken training or professional development as a teaching assistant in your current school/Trust?

- a. IF ANY TRAINING UNDERTAKEN: Can you describe the training or professional development you've undertaken?
 - i. PROBE ON: Training for supporting teaching and learning activities.
 - ii. Training to support pupils with specific educational requirements (SEND; social disadvantage/pupil premium, EAL, etc.)
 - iii. Training for pastoral activities or emotional support (EHC plans; SEMH, etc.)
- b. How effective was this training? For example, what sort of tasks or responsibilities were developed through training or professional development? Do you feel better equipped as a TA as a result?
- c. How have pupils benefited from the training or professional development you have received?
- d. Is training undertaken in contracted time or their own time? If it differs by the type of training, how and why does it differ?

13. IF NO TRAINING UNDERTAKEN: What stops you receiving any training or personal development?

- a. PROMPTS IF REQUIRED
 - i. Available time / working hours
 - ii. (Dis)interest
 - iii. School/Trust culture

iv. Lack of knowledge about what is available

- b. What is your personal view on training or professional development? Why is it attractive / unattractive to you?
- c. What reasons are given by your manager(s) for not offering training or professional development?

14. How, if at all, could (further) training or development help you in your role?

Working conditions and retention

15. Has your pay, hours or working conditions changed over the past couple of years?

- a. What are the reasons for any changes to pay, hours or working conditions?
- b. How do your current terms and conditions suit you? What are the positive and negative things about your current working arrangements?
- c. Do you have flexibility in your hours and working conditions as a teaching assistant? How does this suit you?
- d. To what extent do you think your current role aligns to your contract? For example, are there tasks you perform which are outside your terms and conditions?
 - i. If so, why do you think you are asked to perform these tasks?

16. What aspects of being a teaching assistant do you enjoy the most?

- a. Why do you enjoy these aspects of being a teaching assistant?

17. Conversely, which aspects of being a teaching assistant do you enjoy the least?

- a. What is it about these aspects of the role you like less?
- b. What could be done to improve these parts of the role?

18. For how long do you plan to be a teaching assistant? Please explain why you think that way.

- a. Why do you enjoy these aspects of being a teaching assistant?
- b. Do you view the teaching assistant role as a long-term career? Why do you think that?

19. ASK IF USED TO BE A TEACHER: What prompted you to switch from professional teaching to a teaching assistant role?

- a. What are the key factors that led to any demotivation with teaching (if relevant)?
- b. Are there any circumstances that would encourage you back into professional teaching? What would need to change to encourage back into teaching?

20. IF THEY PLAN TO REMAIN A TA. What are your views on developing a career as a teaching assistant or teacher?

- a. How do you see your future teaching assistant career developing?
 - i. Knowledge and views on any qualifications they might need, including apprenticeships.

ii. What do they know about higher-level teaching assistant positions? Are these of interest?

21. Do you think working as a teaching assistant is a good pathway into professional teaching? Why do you think that?

a. Do they have ambitions to move into professional teaching? What motivates them to consider this route

22. FOR THOSE UNSURE ABOUT REMINING A TA OR LEAVING. What aspects of the teaching assistant role, or the wider school/Trust environment, are making you think about leaving?

a. What other employment opportunities appeal to you? How do the skills and knowledge of the teaching assistant role help for other occupations?

23. What impact, if any, has the cost of living crisis had on how you feel about your teaching assistant role?

a. How do the pay, hours and working conditions compare to other employment opportunities open to you?

b. Would you think about finding a different job as a result of the increasing cost of living?

Closing thoughts

24. Thinking about everything we discussed, what do you think is the most important contribution you make to pupils in your teaching assistant role?

25. What are the key thoughts you want me to take back to the Department for Education about working as a teaching assistant?

26. Thank you. At the start of the interview, I said we would ask your permission to pass on an anonymised transcript of this interview to the Department of Education for their internal analysis. You are under no obligation to give this permission. Can we pass a transcript on to DfE?

Teacher focus group guide

Introduction

1. Ask each attendee to introduce themselves, describe their teaching role (year group, subject, etc.), the number of years they have taught and the attributes of the school or Trust in which they work.
2. Ask each attendee to outline briefly (in a sentence) what they think is the most valuable contribution made by teaching assistants in their classroom or school.

What teaching assistants do

MODERATOR: SHOW STIMULUS 1. Here are a list of different roles and actions teaching assistants might perform.

3. What are the different roles that teaching assistants do in your schools?
 - a. What do you think are the most important three/five roles that teaching assistants perform? (Why – explore reasons during discussion)
 - b. How valuable is teaching assistant support? Why do you think that?
4. How, if at all, are teaching assistant roles and actions valuable for:: EMPHASISE ANY PROMPTS NOT ALREADY DISCUSSED IN THE PREVIOUS QUESTION.
 - a. Supporting you as a professional teacher?
 - b. Helping classroom management?
 - c. Helping pupils learn?
 - d. Improving pupil outcomes?
5. What are the main benefits of teaching assistants?
 - e. What, if anything, would happen if support from teaching assistants was not available? PROMPT ON:
 - i. impact on teacher confidence and performance
 - ii. pupil behaviour
 - iii. pupil outcomes
5. How, if at all, have the roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants changed over the past few years?
 - a. Why do you think teaching assistants' roles have changed? What are the key causes?
 - b. MODERATOR: SHOW STIMULUS 2: Aside from what we just discussed, have any of these factors led to changes in the roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants? Why do you think that?

6. What would you say is the best balance of roles and responsibilities between teachers, teaching assistants and other roles in different school situations? MODERATOR: "SITUATIONS" MEANS WORKING IN THE CLASSROOM, ONE-TO-ONE SPECIALIST SUPPORT, ETC.,.

- a. What would be the ideal number of teaching assistants in your school? Why do you think that?
- b. Are there activities that teaching assistants do that could be performed by other staff? What are these activities and why could others do them?

The impact on pupils and learning outcomes

I'd like to talk more about the impact of teaching assistants' work on pupils.

MODERATOR: SWITCH QUESTIONS 8 AND 7 FOR SPECIAL SCHOOLS – ASK 8, THEN 7

7. What are the different ways that pupils benefit from the work of teaching assistants? Why do you think that?
 - a. How does the work of teaching assistants help pupils progress in their learning?
 - b. What specific teaching assistant activities improve learning outcomes? How do these activities do that?
 - c. How do teaching assistants help maintain good pupil behaviour?
8. How do pupils with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), or those requiring specialist support benefit from the work of teaching assistants?
 - a. What skills or personal qualities makes teaching assistants effective in providing specialist support?
 - b. What are the comparative benefits pupils gain from targeted support compared to more general classroom support?
9. In your experience, how are pupil learning outcomes improved through their relationships with teaching assistants?
 - a. What types of pupils get the most value from teaching assistant support?
 - b. What are the characteristics of teaching assistants that make them effective communicators with pupils?

The relationship between teachers and teaching assistants

I want to think more about your working relationships with teaching assistants now.

10. Can I have a couple of examples from the group that illustrate any really good partnership working between you and one or more teaching assistants?
 - a. What is it about this example that typifies good partnership working? What does "working well together" mean in practice?
 - b. What are the characteristics of the teacher to teaching assistant relationship that support such partnership working?

11. Conversely, can the group think of a couple of examples where partnership working or teacher – teaching assistant relationships could be improved?
- What would need to happen to lead to an improvement?
12. Can you explain how teachers decide how to use teaching assistants for different types of pupil support?
- How much say do you have in assigning teaching assistants to different tasks?
 - What decisions do you need to make when assigning work to teaching assistants?
 - Who makes decisions on other teaching support activities? Why is the management of teaching assistants' work managed in this way?
 - How does the decision-making process differ between general classroom and specialist roles?
 - How do you differentiate what teaching assistants do based on their experience of qualification level?
13. Can the group describe any training you've undertaken in effectively using teaching assistants in the classroom or elsewhere? How useful or otherwise was this training?
- Did the usefulness or effectiveness of training differ by its topic or focus? How?
 - What would you say were the main learning points that you took from any training received?
 - How have you subsequently used what you learned in the classroom or support setting?

Professional development and career pathways

14. Following on from the question of your training, what are the key skills and attributes required of teaching assistants to fulfil their range of roles?
- Based on your experiences, what are teaching assistants' strengths and weaknesses?
15. Based on your experiences, how could the effectiveness of teaching assistants increase?
- What working practices, skills or knowledge could teaching assistants improve to support your role?
 - And what skills or knowledge have the most influence on improving pupils' learning outcomes?
 - MODERATOR PROBE ON: Training for supporting teaching and learning activities.
 - Training to support pupils with specific educational requirements (SEND; social disadvantage/pupil premium, EAL, etc.)

- iii. Training for pastoral activities or emotional support (EHC plans; SEMH, etc.)

IF NOT TRAINING OR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OFFERED:

- c. Why do teaching assistants not receive any training or professional development?
 - d. What other mechanisms are in place to help teaching assistants develop new skills or improve in their role?
16. Do you think working as a teaching assistant is a good pathway into professional teaching? Why do you think that?
- a. What skills do teaching assistants develop that are directly transferable to professional teaching?
 - b. Based on your experience, what challenges would teaching assistants face when training for professional teacher status? Have you any examples to illustrate your point?
17. Have any of you considered switching from professional teacher to a teaching assistant role? Do you know anybody that has?
- a. What are the key factors that might encourage teachers to become teaching assistants?
 - b. Should such a change in profession be encouraged or discouraged? Why do you think that?

Closing thoughts

18. Thinking about everything we discussed, what do you think is the most important contribution teaching assistants make for pupils?
19. What are the key thoughts you want me to take back to the Department for Education about working as a teaching assistant?
20. Thank you. At the start of the interview, I said we would ask your permission to pass on an anonymised transcript of this interview to the Department of Education for their internal analysis. You are under no obligation to give this permission. Can we pass a transcript on to DfE?

STIMULUS 1: The roles and responsibilities of teaching assistants

Teaching and learning support

- Providing general teaching and learning support in a teacher-led classroom (e.g., supporting behaviour, differentiating and reinforcing teacher-led learning)
- Providing tutoring support to pupils outside of the classroom
- Acting as a cover supervisor e.g., covering classes in teacher absence using pre-set work

Specialist support

- Providing one-on-one targeted support within the classroom for pupils with SEND or who have other barriers to learning
- Delivering interventions for pupils with additional needs (including SEND)
- Providing medical support to pupils in the school

General or administrative support

- Administrative tasks (e.g., emails, record keeping including for EHCPs, preparing classroom resources)
- Wraparound cover or supporting extra-curricular activities such as school trips or helping at after-school clubs
- Liaising with parents or families

ANY OTHER ROLES OR RESPONSIBILITIES?

STIMULUS 2: Factors that might have led to changes in the ways teaching assistants are used in schools

Wider context

- Changes prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic
- Changes to Government education policy

Factors related to teaching

- Difficulties in recruiting either teaching assistants or teachers
- Subject area teacher shortages
- Teacher or teaching assistant pedagogical or classroom management skills
- Specialist skills held by teachers or teaching assistant

Changes in pupil numbers or characteristics

- Increases in pupils with special education needs and disabilities (SEND)
- Increases in pupils with education health and care plans (EHCPs)
- Changes to the number of pupils / class sizes / pupil behaviour at the school / Trust

Aspects of the school or multi-academy trust

- Where your school or multi-academy trust is located
- Other school characteristics (e.g., Ofsted)
- The school / Trusts financial circumstances or changes to budgets



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