



Teaching on the cheap?

How deploying teaching assistants to cover for teachers is compromising their value and impact

Summary of research findings

Research summary

This study was designed to provide a detailed and nuanced picture of how the on-going challenge of teacher shortages is driving the deployment of teaching assistants (TAs) to cover whole classes and lead lessons. The study provides evidence of the extent and impact of TAs covering classes on pupils, schools and TAs themselves.

Data were collected via a survey of nearly 6,000 TAs in mainstream and special schools in England and Wales. The results show TAs cover classes for, on average, over three hours a week. One in four TAs report having to cover classes because schools do not have enough teachers and/or are unable to get in external supply teachers. In some schools, unfilled teacher vacancies mean that TAs are planning, teaching and assessing curriculum subjects.

The conditions under which TAs cover classes are challenging. Unlike most teachers, 50 per cent of TAs cover classes without a lesson plan or support from another TA. Despite national guidance stating TAs should not 'actively teach' the lessons and classes they cover, three-quarters of TAs say that covering classes inevitably involves them having to teach pupils. The expectation to teach, the lack of preparation and support, and the short notice nature of covering unplanned teacher absences are sources of stress and anxiety for TAs.

Three in four TAs report that their role is not covered when they cover classes. Not surprisingly, well over half of TAs report that being deployed to cover teachers disrupts their regular work of delivering intervention programmes and providing classroom support for pupils with additional needs. TAs feel that they are letting pupils down. Covering classes diverts TAs from the work that delivers the greatest impact. Consequently, two-thirds of TAs say covering classes negatively impacts the quality of learning in their school, and four in five TAs say it negatively impacts provision for pupils with additional needs.

Three-quarters of TAs are not paid an uplift for covering classes. Those that are report receiving as little as 20 pence extra per hour. TAs feel undervalued and taken for granted. Four in five TAs report that cover has a detrimental impact on their workload and wellbeing.

The conclusion that TAs actively teach lessons to whole classes – too often under conditions to which teachers would object – has significant real-world consequences and implications for accountability and the professional status, pay and conditions of both teachers and TAs.

With a general election due before the end of 2024, the strong likelihood is that teacher shortage and supply will be the number one school workforce issue facing the next government. The workload, recruitment and retention crisis relating to TAs, which this study suggests is brewing, should not be treated by policymakers as a separate and less urgent problem. It is connected to the crisis facing teachers, and efforts to resolve both must include a comprehensive and coordinated programme to support and reward the TA workforce.

It should not take the need to address a crisis affecting teachers to justify and develop policy for and about TAs. There is a clearcut case for a national strategy for TAs, co-developed with them and the NJC unions that represent them. The profile and rigour of this strategy should be informed by an on-going research programme into the working lives of TAs.

Key results and findings

- Three in five TAs (61%) cover classes for up to four hours per week. Two in five TAs (39%) cover classes for at least five hours per week. Some TAs cover classes full-time
- Almost half of TAs (45%) cover classes more than they did last year (2022/23)
- A quarter of TAs report covering classes because their school does not have enough teachers (24%) and/or is unable to get external supply teachers (26%)
- TAs report being deployed to plan, teach and assess curriculum subjects where schools have not replaced a teacher that has left or is absent due to long term sickness. Many TAs find this role challenging and stressful
- Despite being a role that only TAs at Level 4 should carry out, over two-thirds of TAs (68%) that routinely deliver lessons (i.e. do specified work) are in a role below Level 4
- Just one in four TAs (24%) are paid an uplift for covering classes; 76% of TAs are not
- The uplifts TAs receive to cover classes range from as little as 20 pence to £3 per hour
- Three-quarters of TAs (75%) say covering lessons involves actively teaching pupils, yet only half of TAs (51%) report being provided with the teacher's lesson plan
- Half of TAs in mainstream schools (50%) cover classes on their own. Yet teachers, especially in primary/infant schools, regularly have TA support in their classes
- Three-quarters of TAs (74%) do not have their role/duties covered when they cover classes. TAs are trying, and struggling, to provide cover *in addition to* their regular duties
- The majority of TAs report that covering classes gets in the way of carrying out their regular duties, with pupils missing out on classroom support (63%), intervention sessions (58%), and those with an EHCP/IP missing out on one-to-one support (52%)
- Deploying TAs to cover classes diverts them from the work that delivers the greatest impact. As a result, two-thirds of TAs (68%) say covering classes negatively impacts the quality of learning in their school, and four in five TAs (81%) say it negatively impacts provision for pupils with SEND/ALN. A third of TAs say it has a large negative impact
- Four in five TAs say covering classes has a negative impact on their workload (85%) and their health and wellbeing (82%). Covering short notice absences is a particular cause of stress and anxiety
- Around three in five TAs say covering classes has a negative impact on their sense of effectiveness (66%) and their job satisfaction (58%). Many TAs feel that covering classes contributes to a sense of feeling undervalued and taken advantage of.

Further information

The survey that informs this report was commissioned and funded by UNISON. The research was conducted independently by [Rob Webster](#), between January and April 2024.

The full research report – ***Teaching on the cheap? How deploying teaching assistants to cover for teachers is compromising their value and impact*** – can be downloaded [here](#).