South Australian
State School Leaders
Association

Literature Review – Teacher Assistants

1.   **The Utilisation of the Australian and International Teacher Assistant Workforce**

A literature review is provided to give an overview of the academic research in relation to education support staff with the aim of guiding recommendations for reform of this education workforce cohort. For the purpose of the literature review, the term teacher assistant (TA) will be used instead of SSO (School Services Officer) to provide consistency in terminology with national and international research.

The introduction of the *Disability Discrimination Act (1992)* and *Disability Standards for Education (2005)* has seen the role of a teacher assistant (TA) dramatically change from classroom helper (preparing and ordering materials, organising the learning environment, personal care, social and behavioural support, and supervising non-instructional activities) to that of a para-teaching professional; the majority of TAs now give learning support to students rather than support to teachers. Reform of the Disability Standards initiated a more inclusive education approach in Australian schools; students with disability and learning difficulties were provided with support to access learning in mainstream schools (Butt, 2018). However, this created a greater workload for teachers as classrooms became more complex with related activities such as task differentiation and support, and administrative duties such as development of learning plans, and paperwork to access funding to assist these students. As students qualify for additional funding based on the severity of disability or special education need, schools are finding that TAs provide a cost effective, flexible, and funded resource to relieve workload complexities for teachers (Butt, 2016a).

Internationally, scholars agree that TAs became the 'solution to inclusion' and were used as a 'band aid' or 'quick fix' mechanism to support inclusive education (Giangreco, 2010). Their job has now significantly grown to an instructional role and they are often required to make pedagogical decisions beyond their level of expertise. Increasingly, tasks that were previously the remit of teachers have shifted to TAs (Butt, 2016b; Butt, 2018). Giangreco (2013) cites that TAs have become almost exclusively *the way* rather than *a way* to support students with special needs. The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) Project, the largest research study on the role of TAs in the classroom in the United Kingdom, noted that the TA workforce more than trebled in size since the push for inclusive education of students with special educational needs and disabilities, and in 2011 43% of the education workforce comprised of support staff (Blatchford et. al, 2012). Likewise, there are currently around 105,000 TAs working in Australia which is a fourfold increase since 1990

(ABS, 2021; cited in Stoneman & Hunter, 2022) and in the USA, the number of TAs quadrupled from 2006 to 2014 (Butt, 2016a).

Compounding this issue is a lack of systemic coherence about what inclusive education means in Australia. This confusion goes hand-in-hand with detrimental practices determining resourcing, support and accountability for students with a disability and learning difficulties. Shaddock et al. (2007) note that a common response to inclusive education in Australia is to 'velcro' a TA to a child. Australian schools are lacking expertise in the very fundamentals of inclusive education and support staff are inadequately trained (Mavropoulou et. al, 2021). Schools need to work at closing the divide between policy and practice otherwise unqualified TAs are being placed in positions of responsibility that are unacceptable and inequitable for student learning (Bourke & Carrington, 2007). Giangreco (2013) explains that if a school lacks clear models for inclusive education, they become fertile grounds for unhelpful justification approaches to flourish in ways that subject students to questionable supports from TAs. There is universal agreement in the literature that employing TAs as a key service delivery model for education for students with disability and learning difficulties is unequitable and contrary to the very idea of inclusive education.

The DISS Project reported that the growth of paraprofessionals has had a positive impact on the workload pressures of teachers and their job satisfaction, classroom discipline, and the quality and amount of teaching teachers are able to achieve with a TA in the classroom (Webster, et. al, 2012). Likewise, Giangreco (2010) cites that when TAs are involved in non-instructional roles (administrative, personal care, materials management) they create more time and opportunities for teachers to work with students with disabilities and special needs. However, the critical concern of the DISS Project is that students who receive support from TAs make significantly less progress than similar students with less or no TA support. The only measure where TAs do make a positive impact is when they are trained to use structured evidence based interventions in small groups or one-on-one support (impact of attainment of around three to four months' learning progress in a year). However, experienced qualified teachers typically provide around six additional months' progress in a year (Sharples et. al, 2015). Conversely, Giangreco's (2010 & 2013) research from the USA cites that TAs have difficultly implementing interventions with fidelity, are often not appropriately trained or accredited in administering interventions, do not use evidence based interventions and are prone to unhelpful behaviours that have detrimental effects such as confusing information, supplying answers, focusing on task completion over conceptual understanding, dependency, and interference with teacher engagement. Giangreco (2010) stresses that any training undertaken must be based on explicit and intensive research-based practices, with ongoing supervision to ensure the fidelity of implementation.

The seven recommendations from the Guidance Report of the DISS Project (Sharples et. al, 2018) are listed below and are incorporated with further research in the following sections of this review:

1. TAs should not be used as an informal teaching resource for low attaining students.
2. Use TAs to add value to what teachers do, not replace them – organise staff so students who struggle most have as much time with the teacher as other students.
3. Use TAs to help students develop independent learning skills and manage their own learning.
4. Ensure TAs are fully prepared for their role in the classroom.
5. Use TAs to deliver high-quality one-on-one small group support using evidence based interventions – these must be highly structured settings, with high quality training. Learning outcomes will be negative if TAs are deployed in informal and unsupported instructional roles.
6. Adopt evidence-based interventions to support TAs in their small group and one-on-one instruction.
7. Ensure explicit connections are made between learning from everyday classroom teaching and structured interventions.

The overall research consensus is that there is no strong conceptual or theoretical basis for assigning the least qualified, lowest paid and often inadequately trained staff to provide the bulk of instruction for students with special needs. Moreover, simply increasing the number of TAs does not result in improved learning outcomes for students, and alternatives to overreliance on TAs and proactive models of service delivery are needed (Giangreco, 2010). Researchers are surprised that the practice of employing TAs to support inclusive education practices continues to grow when there is little supportive evidence that learning outcomes are improved (Butt, 2018).

These concerns are generating media attention in Australia. A recent article from ABC News (Richards & Lavelle, 2023) highlights this issue in the public domain and this is likely to continue to grow with professional and public discourse during South Australia's current enterprise bargaining negotiations as workload reduction through hiring more TAs is sought by the Australian Education Union. The current Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System by the Federal Government will also focus on teacher workload and the role of TAs. The Richards and Lavelle (2023) article features TAs and Australian education academics claiming that "some TAs are solely responsible for education of students with disabilities" and "unqualified staff risk the success of students with disabilities". With awareness of this issue developing, it is essential to ensure that continuing the concerning employment practice of workload reduction through moving the workload problem to a different class of employee is not perpetuated in industrial regulation and overshadowing meaningful inclusion.

2.   **Resourcing and Deployment**

Chan et.al (2020) describes how the job creation of TAs is based on funding of student need and therefore work is of a contract nature leading to unstable working relationships and low retention rates. Likewise, Butt (2016b) found that models used to deploy TAs in schools are linked to funding provided for TAs rather than a best practice approach based on pedagogical understanding to improve learning outcomes. The link between deployment and funding creates a transient model of employment – when one day or less of TA time is funded for one or more students (Butt, 2016a). When this model is implemented, timetables work around students' needs in different classrooms. This proves to be a challenging model of deployment which leaves TAs floundering. Transient models of employment also result in TAs passing quickly through a school as funding needs change; TAs pick up unskilled and short term work which is 'gap filling' in nature. This results in a large number of positions on relatively low hours which will fail to attract the best talent possible as people generally seek stable employment. Likewise, good performing casual or contract employees are likely to continue to look for permanent employment, contributing to high turnover and low retention (Taylor 2019, p. 6). Job security is a leading pull factor for staff to move to an alternate school offering permanent employment (Taylor 2019, p. 320). This high employee turnover has a negative impact on the school. Besides the costs involved in hiring and training new employees, continual changes in staff decreases productivity and lowers quality levels.

A further research study stemming from the DISS Report in the UK was the Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants (EDTA) project (2012). This was government funded and sought to develop robust workplace frameworks for clear, well-informed guidance on effective ways to deploy and prepare TAs and then measure this impact on teachers, teaching, and students. The researchers worked with school leaders, teachers and TAs within normal circumstances and funding arrangements (Webster, et. al, 2012). The following areas of improvement were found:

Planning and feedback time for lesson preparation

During the EDTA study, TAs' hours of work were modified to create time for teacher and TA collaboration. This proved more difficult for secondary schools due to the greater number of teachers and classes that TAs worked across. Without time for planning, TAs found themselves under prepared for lessons and reported that they were going into lessons 'blind'. After planning time was introduced, TAs felt that more time with teachers was beneficial, especially in providing detailed lesson plans and teaching material in advance. This clarified expectations and teachers found that the extra time needed to plan with TAs were offset by the advantages they noticed in the

capabilities of their TAs (Webster, et. al, 2012). This is contrasted with Butt's (2016a) study in Australia where it was found that TAs were prevented from attending staff meetings, planning days, and collaborating with teachers for students' education plans as they were not paid for work done outside of school hours. A principal in the study noted that extra collaboration time would be ideal but it is too expensive to implement. The lack of meeting and collaboration time led to TAs feeling undervalued, as if their voice was unimportant. They also entered classes unprepared and 'blind' to lesson content. The lack of collaboration with teachers left TAs unable to give feedback to teachers about students and vice versa. Sharples et. al (2018) recommends that school leaders can adjust TAs' hours of work, such as early start/late finish, to allow essential teacher liaison time before and after school.

Deployment

The EDTA Study found that a lack of school-wide agreement on the role of TAs led to ambiguity and variation in the ways teachers deployed TAs, but overall they were utilised for students with special learning needs such as learning difficulties like dyslexia. School leaders therefore changed their thinking about the TA role in terms of student outcomes. Importantly, teachers began to work with students with learning difficulties in small groups while the TA kept order by roving around the classroom supervising. After the project, TAs had switched to spending over half their time working with middle to high attaining pupils, giving those students who needed greater teacher instruction the opportunity. Involvement in the EDTA study challenged leaders and teachers to organise their classrooms effectively to ensure all students received equal amounts of teacher time in the school week. The research noted that school leaders are the best placed decision makers in a school with respect to how students with special learning needs and learning difficulties receive the best quality teaching practices through TA deployment, responsibilities, and collaboration (Webster, et. al, 2012).

Sharples et. al (2018) agree with the notion that deployment methods can be flipped and TAs can work with accomplished students to allow time for teachers to work with lower-attaining pupils. In an article in The Conversation tilted *'Australia spends $5 billion a year on teaching assistants in schools but we don't know what they do'* (Sonnemann & Hunter, 2022) it is suggested that TAs can also assist with yard duty and extra-curricular activities such as school sports. It is estimated that teachers can save an extra two hours a week to focus on teaching if these role changes were implemented. However, it is noted that industrial regulations in jurisdictions may be preventing this from occurring.

Butt's (2016b) study identified five main deployment methods of TAs which are linked to funding, as described below. It was noted that the type of funding received determined the deployment method.

1. The *withdrawal model* removes students with a disability or learning difficulties individually or in small groups from the classroom. This leads to low quality instruction which is often carried out by an unqualified TA without oversight from a teacher. Students are distanced from their teacher, peers, and curriculum and their self-esteem is affected. This model is considered the least inclusive of support and questions the duty of care obligation of teachers when students are removed from their class.

2. The *itinerant model* involves the TA working across several classes with different teachers and multiple students. The teacher acts as host educator until the TA arrives to take on the role of primary educator. The teacher gives the TA instruction about the lesson and support required (this usually takes less than a minute). This model leads to isolation, stigmatisation, and marginalisation of the student. The TA is held responsible for complex teaching tasks for which they are not qualified such as differentiation, reteaching, and reinforcing learning.

3. The *unit support model* enables a TA to support students in the same year level and across a maximum of four classes. This model also precludes teacher supervision, collaboration, and assistance with complex intervention with learning difficulties.

4. The *one-on-one model* places a TA in a classroom with a student and again reduces time with the teacher and peers. When using this model, students with a disability or learning difficulty received most of their teaching instruction from a TA not a qualitied teacher.

5. The *class support model* permanently assigns a TA to support the whole class under the direction of the teacher and proves the most effective model. It is more collaborative in its approach as the teacher can be engaged with the TA in supporting learning and behaviour and the TA can have valuable time observing the teacher's instruction. This model works successfully if the teacher is prepared to train and collaborate with the TA in effective strategies to use with students.

Butt's (2016b) research offers an alternative to the above models of TA support and deployment titled the Teacher Assistant As Facilitator Model (TAAF). This design involves the teacher being responsible for the whole class curriculum with a focus on those students who most need support. TAs contribute by facilitating the learning of the students who need it least with work planned by the teacher. It is noted that changes in entrenched deployment models will require teachers to undergo a cultural shift in their beliefs about teaching and learning; taking into consideration that current attitudes are resulting in the barrier to inclusion seen today (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014).

3.   **Job Design and Qualifications**

Although the change in the role of the TA has been significant there has not been a complementary change in the level of skill needed to undertake the job. The pre-requisite for qualifications are inconsistent across Australian education jurisdictions. It is now more common to see TAs required to have a minimum of a certificate III or IV in education support; however, there is no mandatory entry level qualifications in any Australian jurisdiction and entry level roles (level 1) are the most abundant (Butt, 2018).

Role ambiguity is initially shaped in job design with poor information provided in job descriptions and inadequate inductions leading to ambiguous employment expectations (Butt, 2016a). Jung (2014) agrees that the job design and job and person specifications (J&P) for TAs are vague and general which contributes to role ambiguity. It was noted in the Australian study by Butt (2016a) that only permanently employed TAs received a duty statement and most had a lack of information about what tasks they were meant to perform which put them in a challenging position. Further, in Butt and Lowe's research (2012) there is contrary opinions on the roles of a TA – TAs believe that they are employed to support students with special needs whereas teachers believe TAs are employed to assist them with implementing their learning programs. The South Australian Ministerial Advisory Paper into Students with Disability (Snodgrass & Butcher, 2005) also described the need for clearer definitions of roles and responsibilities both at the systems level and site level; the more specific the program, the more explicit definition and implicit understanding of the role is required. Giangreco (2010) suggests that roles of teachers and special educators must first be determined in inclusive classrooms before determining the role of TAs. If improvements focus solely on the TA, without attention given to the teachers, it can be counterproductive and lead to a 'training trap'. A training trap occurs when minimally trained TAs take on primary instruction they believe that they are adequately trained to do. Clearly defined role descriptions will prevent this from occurring.

Butt (2018) cites that many job descriptions for TAs in Australia state that qualifications are desirable; however, attaining a qualification gives no assurance of increased job opportunities, increased responsibility or an increase in salary, and this gives little incentive to gain a qualification. Snodgrass and Butcher's (2005) South Australian Ministerial Advisory Paper recommended that TAs working with students with disabilities and learning difficulties have a qualification in special education support and training in behaviour management. It was noted that most TAs have no specialist training in disabilities and there are no testing methods to determine personal literacy levels. Due to the nature of temporary and transient employment, schools are reluctant to invest in training without the assurance of continuing work for the TA (Butt, 2018).

Further Australian research by Butt (2016a & 2018) cites that TAs do not require a qualification beyond year 10 and for those that did possess a vocational education certificate, a bona fide was not requested. This

made the TA feel unimportant and they felt that schools wanted support staff who could start work immediately rather than being qualified. In this study, a principal was reported responding with, "when we need a TA we basically pull people in off the street. Their qualifications don't really matter". However, teachers in this study had a different understanding, and all teachers surveyed thought their TAs had qualifications in learning support as it was the core duty of their role. They were surprised to know that a TA could be employed with no post school qualification past year 10 as they were tasked with differentiating tasks for students – these are complex tasks even for teachers to perform. As teachers are rarely involved in the recruitment process, most teachers had not sighted the TAs job description. At the time of Butt's research publication (2018) there was only one Australian State – Queensland – that required TAs to have mandatory training when working with students with disabilities.

Butt's (2016a) Australian study also criticised induction and training for TAs. Inductions gave limited information about privacy, confidentiality, and duty of care which led to some TAs communicating inappropriately with parents and half of the TAs in the study being unsure of what level of duty of care they had, only that it was different to a teacher. Some TAs questioned if they should be working one-on-one with students outside the classroom due to conflicting views on their role and duty of care. A lack of induction and orientation left TAs feeling isolated from the physical, social, and administrative structures in the school.

4. Professional Development and Performance

Professional development is problematic as a lack of suitable training is available; further, if training was provided on a day that the TA did not work, they were not paid. TAs in the Canberra Education Department are entitled to four days training a year, but a common theme was that they had difficulty finding and attending suitable training (Butt, 2018). In South Australia, predominant barriers to training were cited as availability of relief staff, training costs, time constraints, and travel restrictions for country staff (Snodgrass & Butcher, 2005). The research of Chan et. al (2020) found that it is advantageous to enhance the engagement of TAs in more complex classroom duties through the provision of professional development to prepare them for the challenges in the context of inclusive classrooms.

In Butt and Lowe's research (2012) teachers and TAs identified the areas of literacy, numeracy, and inclusive education practices as most beneficial for training. Teachers added that TAs needed training in how students learn to read to be able to assist with reading practice. Regardless of the training provided, Blatchford et. al (2012) note that teachers must be the leader of instruction and TAs should only provide secondary and additional support.

With respect to performance management, Butt (2016a) found that TAs are usually line managed by the school's Business Manager, who has an administrative role away from the classroom and are unable to offer performance feedback. Likewise, the classroom teacher did not collaborate to discuss performance with the line manager and TA and most TAs in the study never received any performance feedback. Breton (2010) recommends that feedback should be provided by the teacher and supervisor; however, Butt's (2016a) study found that Business Managers rarely visited classrooms to observe TAs. Moreover, the high turnover rate due to the unstable nature of contract and transient employment results in a low propensity for formal performance appraisals to occur and TAs often fall short of annual performance appraisal cycles.

Webster et. al (2012) identified that it is vital for governments to clarify the broad role of TAs at the national level to ensure productivity, value for money, and to raise education standards. Education in Australia is defined by professional standards for teachers and principals by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) which are incorporated in the J&Ps of teachers and principals. With the evolving role of TAs to that of paraprofessionals, their role is not mentioned in the standards nor how their work supports education practice (aitsl.edu.au). The only jurisdiction to create their own professional standards for TAs is the Northern Territory (Assistant Teacher Professional Standards March 2016). These standards clearly define professional practice, knowledge, and corresponding qualifications at each classification level (Northern Territory Department of Education). The gap between research and practice is exemplified when professional educational bodies such as AITSL do not validate the professional role that TAs bring to schools.

5.   **Professional Status and Career Pathways**

In Trent's (2014) Hong Kong study it was found that TAs face challenges in constructing a professional identity; they are teaching, but not really a teacher. Their role was often insufficient to place them on a trajectory towards teaching and their lack of professional identity led some to question a career in teaching. Trent (2014) concluded that the role of the TA needed to be reconceptualised to ensure they had status and identity in the school as the current international consensus is that TAs have confusion and uncertainty over their roles and responsibilities. Likewise, Butt and Lowe (2012) state that in light of the growth of the TA sector, governments need to provide specifically targeted skills based training, mandatory pre-service training, regular in-service training, and the provision of career pathways which may also assist with the teacher supply shortage in Australia. The South Australian Ministerial Advisory Paper into the Professional Development of School Services Officers (Snodgrass & Butcher, 2005) cited the importance of career pathways which support the education paraprofessional to teacher. They note that courses which have a diploma level of attainment have a university articulation arrangement; however, diploma level courses are limited and are not offered in South Australia.

6.   Summary of Key Themes

A Flawed Facilitation of Inclusive Education

The advent of inclusive education in 2005 has seen the role of the teacher become more complex; as teachers' pedagogy and workload transformed so did that of their classroom helpers – teacher assistants. TAs have had a positive effect on assisting teachers with their increased workload; however, the modification of their roles were makeshift and not grounded in evidence based practice. This has resulted in an increase in duties that TAs are not qualified to perform and are to the detriment of student learning, especially those students already struggling with disability and learning difficulties. Nationally and internationally, the TA workforce has grown exponentially, but their job design and expertise is largely juxtaposed to the fundamental concept of inclusive education leading to inequitable and unacceptable practice.

Funding Allocation Characteristics are to the Detriment of Students and the Workforce

The evidence suggests that allocating funding to the student with a disability and/or special learning needs creates a barrier to successful recruitment and deployment of support staff. This method results in a large number of employees on temporary contracts with limited hours which creates a transient workforce and secondary labour market with adverse job characteristics such as limited access to training, collaboration time, and career progression. Ultimately, labour market supply of TAs and their recruitment and retention are highly problematic issues in creating and sustaining a skilled and stable workforce. Resourcing the TA workforce has been misunderstood and underdeveloped resulting in a loss in productivity through negative outcomes with respect to student learning.

Flexibility and Equity in Deployment is Required

The research identified school leaders as being the best placed decision makers to inform how funding is utilised for TA deployment. Common practices such as one-on-one and withdrawal methods of TA support were found to be regressive and restrictive in terms of student access time with teachers and peers leading to detrimental effects on student learning and social and emotional wellbeing. Resources can give greater benefit to the teacher and student if they are used to deploy TAs in the most equitable and effective ways possible and not strictly tied to a student. This allows flexibility in resourcing to essentially 'flip' the current deployment method of teachers and TAs so all students receive equal amounts of time with teachers. The research illustrates that this is achievable if the teacher is responsible for the whole class curriculum with a

focus on students who need support. The TA can then contribute by facilitating the learning of the students who need the least attention through planned work from the teacher.

Professional Standards at a Systems and School Level

There is a strong need for clearer definitions of TA roles and responsibilities at the systems and school level. The pre-requisites for TA qualifications across Australia are inconsistent and the majority of entry level roles do not require any qualifications beyond year 10. This lack of capability is further compounded by poor information being provided in job descriptions leading to ambiguous employment expectations of both the TA and the teacher. The research indicated that teachers thought their TAs had qualifications as their role contained complex tasks that were even difficult for teachers to perform. At the systems level, it is vital for governments and professional bodies such as AITSL to define professional standards for education practice in classroom support roles. Such standards will also determine qualification levels at classification points and give schools a platform to devise appropriate role descriptors and give TAs a pathway to the teaching profession. Reform in this area will act as a productivity enhancer – a nationally consistent skilled workforce will raise efficiency and effectiveness, ultimately increasing the standard of education provided.

Reconceptualising the Role of the Teacher Assistant

The issues identified in this literature review stem from a corpus of national and international research which has consistently identified that students who receive support from TAs make significantly less progress than similar students with less or no TA support. This research has garnered little traction for reform in Australian schools and it is now time to reconceptualise the role of a TA to that of a paraprofessional with an important role to play in education. To support this new thinking, a cultural shift is required to overcome entrenched TA deployment methods by teachers and leaders. This shift will also be required at a systems level as the research has indicated that the interconnectedness of funding and deployment are not providing cogent delivery of inclusive education. True inclusion gives all students the same amount of time with the teacher and allocating tied funding for a TA to work with students with disabilities and special needs will result in continuing the same concerning practice of the bulk of instruction being delivered from the least qualified support staff. Flexibility in deployment and funding will assist in breaking the temporary and transient models of employment for TAs, leading to acceptable employment conditions and the development of a professional, stable, and highly skilled workforce which will ultimately achieve growth in learning outcomes for all students.

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