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***'It's properly changed, and I think it's going to continue.'* How the pandemic and the cost of living crisis remade the teaching assistant role**

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'It's properly changed, and I think it's going to continue.' How the pandemic and the cost of living crisis remade the teaching assistant role

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents evidence of how the role of teaching assistants (TAs) in England has been remade by the Covid pandemic. Drawing on data from a national survey of 9,055 TAs and 22 semi-structured interviews with TAs, teachers and headteachers, the authors show how essential TAs were to schools' responses to managing the disruption caused by the pandemic. TAs kept schools functioning and supported the pastoral and wellbeing needs of children and families, both in school and in the wider community. As life and learning return to normal, the informal duties that TAs took on during lockdown have persisted, leading to a marked increase in workload. At the same time, TAs find themselves struggling to make ends meet amid a fresh crisis concerning the rising cost of living. Headteachers report fears of losing TAs to better-paid jobs and being unable to recruit replacements. Problems maintaining provision for pupils with additional needs and exacerbating challenges regarding teacher workload and retention are forecast. Despite schools' innovative and well-meaning efforts to recognise and demonstrate their appreciation of TAs, this paper argues that this does not amount to a robust TA retention strategy. A comprehensive national development strategy and investment in the TA workforce is recommended to address longstanding issues concerning their role, identity, value and pay.

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Introduction

The drive towards the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools has been accompanied and enabled by an increase in the employment and deployment of a relatively new kind of classroom support staff. Various defined in the UK as teaching assistants or

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learning support assistants, teacher aides (Australia and New Zealand), and paraeducators (USA), it has been said that policies of inclusion and provision for pupils with SEND in mainstream schools would be impossible to implement without them (Blatchford et al., 2012; Webster, 2022).

Education systems in many developed countries have seen sizable and sustained increases in this part of their school workforce (Giangreco et al., 2014; Navarro, 2015; Webster & de Boer, 2022). In many cases, this growth has been part of a broader and longer-term trend in the rise of paraprofessionals in other sectors – notably health, social work and the police – to assist the delivery of public services. The growth in support staff in schools has been particularly pronounced in the UK. Over the last 25 years, the number of TAs in mainstream schools in England has more than trebled (Department for Education, 2017, 2023). At the most recent count (DfE, 2023), TAs comprised 29% of the overall school workforce: 37% of the primary and nursery school workforce, 14% of the secondary school workforce, and 52% of the special school workforce.

A short history of the TA role

The origin of the TA role in UK schools can be found in the parent-helper model, which took off in infant and primary schools during the 1980s. Some schools had as many as 50 parents helping a week (Caudrey, 1985), providing a much-needed extra pair of hands to deliver activities such as cookery, art and school trips. Parent-helpers also assisted teachers with the time-consuming task of listening to pupils read, which they typically did outside of the bustling classroom. Good reading skills improved children's access to the curriculum, and as this was something that parents routinely did at home, schools surmised that this task could be safely delegated to willing volunteers.

Soon, additional adults were working frequently alongside teachers *inside* the classroom. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, mainstream schools began educating greater numbers of pupils who might have previously attended a specialist setting, and parent-helpers were quickly co-opted to the inclusion cause (Thomas, 1992). Voluntary arrangements were formalised into salaried positions as 'welfare assistants' and 'special needs assistants', as school leaders took the pragmatic decision to reappoint some of their parent-helper capacity to support pupils with the greatest need of adult attention. Other parent-helper roles evolved into more general 'classroom assistant' or 'teaching assistant' posts.

The teaching assistant (or TA, as we use hereon) role has historically been classed as a 'non-teaching' role. However, this is a misnomer. An unequivocal finding from the world's largest study on TA deployment found that TAs in UK schools spend most of their time working in a direct pedagogical role (Blatchford et al., 2012). National guidance for schools now accepts, and

indeed promotes, the deployment of TAs in instructional roles under certain controlled conditions (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021).

Role ambiguity and TAs' sense of identity and value

In operational terms, however, there are key aspects to the TA role that have remained largely unresolved and unreconciled (Griffin & Blatchford, 2021; Tucker, 2009; Webster, 2022). It is a role that is frequently described within the national and international literature as 'multifaceted' and 'ambiguous' (Blatchford et al., 2012; Lehane, 2016; Lübeck & Demmer, 2022; Östlund et al., 2021; Vivash & Morgan, 2019; Webster, 2022; Zhao et al., 2022). The ambiguity is often mentioned in relation to the overlap the role has with that of the teacher. Furthermore, as research by Östlund and colleagues in Sweden illustrates, there is also ambiguity *between* paraprofessional roles ostensibly focussed on instruction and caregiving.

The multifaceted nature of the TA role encompasses a residual pastoral function carried over from the earlier welfare assistant role (Alborz et al., 2009; Blatchford et al., 2012). As part of a policy response to tackling teacher workload, the schools workforce in England expanded in the early 2000s with the creation of a cadre of specific (and genuinely non-teaching) pupil welfare support staff, including learning mentors, welfare officers, home-school liaison assistants/officers, attendance assistants/officers, and parent support advisors (Blatchford et al., 2012; Edmond & Price, 2009). On one hand, this had the effect of reducing the proportion of time both TAs and teachers spent undertaking pastoral duties. However, this was relatively shortly lived. A near-decade of cuts to school budgets has resulted in schools dramatically scaling back the number of support staff in pastoral and welfare roles, with TAs reabsorbing this function on an informal basis (Unison, 2018, 2022).

The enduring lack of agreement and clarity about the role and purpose of TAs – even within the context of SEND provision, in which it is best understood – has affected TAs' sense of identity and place in the wider machinery of contemporary schooling (Geeson & Clarke, 2023). There are no systematic data to corroborate this trend, but small scale studies (e.g. Skipp & Hopwood, 2019; Watson et al., 2013) consistently find that TAs report feeling unrecognised and undervalued, and that schools do not fully appreciate the role they perform in supporting the educational and developmental needs of the most vulnerable and challenging pupils. In periodic surveys of its membership, the UK's largest trade union representing TAs has found that, despite high levels of job satisfaction, around half of respondents report feeling valued as a member of the school team; the other half do not (Unison, 2014, 2021).

TAs during Covid

Within the last three decades, TAs have become ‘the mortar in the brickwork [that] hold schools together in numerous and sometimes unnoticed ways’ (Webster et al., 2021). One context that had the potential to make the essentialness of TAs to schools more visible and valued was the Covid pandemic. From January 2020, as the virus began to severely disrupt education across the world, governments and researchers initiated, at impressive speed, studies to track the impact of Covid and lockdowns on pupils and teachers. To take England as an indicative example, studies (some of which are on-going) have focussed on the academic learning, attainment, and mental and physical wellbeing of children and young people (for example: Andrews, 2023; Education Endowment Foundation, 2022; Holt-White et al., 2023; Howard et al., 2021; Kuhn et al., 2022; Milanovic et al., 2022; Skipp et al., 2020, 2021; Tuckett et al., 2022), and on teachers’ working conditions and mental and physical wellbeing (for example: Allen et al., 2020; Kim & Asbury, 2020; Kim et al., 2022; Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2021, 2022).

Taking a wider community-level view, Moss et al. (2021) reported on the way families turned to schools as important sources of welfare support in the lockdowns. They cite the array of nonstandard situations to which schools responded: children in need of food and clothing; families living in inadequate housing with insufficient space and resources to maintain learning at home; families with limited digital connectivity; individual pupils facing mental health crises; and children experiencing difficult domestic circumstances, including domestic violence.

UK readers will recall how the public venerated the institutions and key-workers that maintained essential services during national lockdowns with a weekly ‘Clap for Carers’: a popular definition that included teachers, but did not extend to TAs or other school support staff (Barr, 2020). As the pandemic wore on, it was clear that TAs were also missing from the national recordkeeping of this once-in-a-century collective experience. The overall data collection effort tracking the impact of Covid on education in England did not include ways of capturing, systematically or otherwise, TAs’ role in schools’ responses to keep functioning during the lockdowns, or how they were experiencing the pandemic on a professional or personal level. Nor were there studies describing how TAs were involved in what happened post-lockdown, as life and learning began returning to normal.

The aims and purpose of this paper

This paper reports on two studies, conducted between January 2021 and June 2022, which were set up to address the gaps described above. Taken together, these studies aimed to capture the role and impact of TAs during

the pandemic, their experiences of it, and to provide an assessment of the extent to which it affected how they felt their role and contribution was valued by their school. Drawing on data from these studies, this paper uses the context of the pandemic to address some enduring questions about TAs. These are:

- What roles did TAs play in schools' responses to supporting teaching and learning and welfare support during the lockdowns, and what was the impact?
- To what extent did the balance between TAs' pedagogical function and their welfare function change during and after the lockdowns?
- To what extent did the pandemic affect the degree to which TAs' felt their school valued their role and contribution, during Covid and more generally?
- What do good schools do to recognise TAs and show their appreciation for their role in, and contribution to, school?

This paper fulfils several purposes. Firstly, it puts on record the contribution made by over a quarter of the school workforce during the pandemic, which, as noted, is not covered in the literature. Secondly, it provides evidence of the essential role and positive impact TAs can have in times of major disruption to education, and as such, can inform policy responses and on-the-ground action in the event of future lockdowns. Thirdly, and more immediately, it offers practical ideas for schools to inform retention strategies at a time when public institutions and households in the UK (and elsewhere) are not only contending with the reverberations of the Covid years, but also with the effects of the rising cost of living.

Samples and methods

Study 1

The first study was a survey of 9,055 TAs working in early years, primary, secondary and special settings across the UK. It was conducted while schools were under lockdown in all parts of the UK, and open only to vulnerable children and children of keyworkers. The aim of Study 1 was to identify the range of tasks that TAs undertook to help keep schools functioning and support the delivery of remote learning during lockdown.

Due to the uniquely challenging circumstances at the time, the study used a convenience sampling approach. The survey was posted across social media, but there was particular reliance on the study funder (Unison) to assist with dissemination. Consequently, 93% of respondents were Unison members. The majority of respondents (86%) worked in a setting in England, and 70% worked in the infant/primary sector. While this influenced the analysis, the distribution of the sample across state-funded early years, primary, secondary and special settings was proportionately representative of the UK's TA workforce in each of

these sectors (Department for Education, 2021; Scottish Government, 2021; Welsh Government, 2021).

The survey questions were designed to explore how TAs managed different dimensions of their role, and the support they received in carrying them out, given the additional difficulties many of them faced balancing their responsibilities at work with their responsibilities to their own families at home. Numerical data were obtained mainly via items in the form of statements, with respondents required to indicate the extent to which they agreed/disagreed. The survey included a number of open-ended items, which allowed respondents to expand on their answers, provide additional detail, and share their views and experiences. The most responses received for an open-ended question was 1,574, or 17% of respondents.

The results of the survey are reported in full in Moss et al. (2021).

Study 2

The second study was a direct follow-up to Study 1, conducted during spring 2022. It built on the survey results by providing a qualitative description of what the TA role looked like during the pandemic and during the 12 months following the third and final national lockdown in England (March/April 2021). From spring 2021, schools fully reopened and the government put a renewed emphasis on making sure pupils were supported to 'catch up' on 'lost learning'. For convenience, we refer to this period as the Covid recovery period.

Study 2 set out to understand if and how the TA role had changed as a result of the pandemic: from pre-Covid to the lockdown stage; and from the lockdown stage to the recovery period. Given the tendency, when asked, for TAs to report that they feel undervalued or underappreciated, and with schools still reeling from the pandemic disruption and the pathway to full recovery uncertain, this study additionally sought to identify examples of what good schools do to recognise, value, incentivise and ultimately retain their TAs at a pivotal point in the effort to 'build back better'.

This study took a case study approach, and used semi-structured interviews with TAs, teachers and the headteacher in a small number of schools in order to obtain different insights into how TAs were deployed during the recovery phase and the impact on the TAs themselves and the wider school. A purposive sample approach was used. Schools were identified via an online expression of interest survey addressed to headteachers of mainstream schools across England, and circulated via local authority contacts and across social media. The survey collected broad demographic data about each school and its pupil population (e.g. region; proportion of school roll with SEND), which were used to ensure that the schools selected to take part were as diverse as possible. Another criterion used for selection was an indicator of the extent to which TAs themselves felt valued by the school. This necessarily relied on the judgement of the headteacher; however, the research

Table 1. Contextual information on schools in Study 2.

School A Hampshire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ~600 pupils ● +90% White British ● 25% Pupil Premium ● 15% SEND ● 19 EHCPs ● 32 TAs
School B London	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ~400 pupils ● In area with high level of deprivation ● Ethnically diverse staff and pupil roll (+30 languages spoken) ● 18 EHCPs ● 30 TAs and other pupil support staff
School C Cambridge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ~600 pupils ● Many parents/carers employed as keyworkers ● ~13% Pupil Premium ● 26 TAs
School D Hampshire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 79 pupils ● Rural location ● 48% Pupil Premium ● 7 TAs employed
School E Birmingham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ~400 pupils ● In area experiencing significant population growth ● Predominantly non-white; 10% Romany Gypsy heritage ● ~43% Pupil Premium ● 14 TAs

approach provided some guardrails, insofar as this self-assessment would be verifiable on the basis of the data collected via the interviews with TAs and teachers.

Five primary schools were selected to take part in Study 2.¹ Contextual information about each school, obtained via the expression of interest survey and the interview with the headteacher, is presented in Table 1. Interviews were conducted with a total of 23 school staff: nine TAs; eight teachers; five headteachers; and one senior leader. Interviews took place online (via Zoom) and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The interviews covered two broad themes: i) TAs' role during the lockdowns and the recovery period; and ii) effective strategies for recognising the role and contribution of TAs and ensuring they feel valued and included in school life.

Transcriptions of the interviews were produced using Zoom's automated transcription function, and checked against the audio recording for accuracy. A combination of inductive and deductive coding methods was used to analyse these data. A thematic coding framework was developed, grouped in terms of the main interview themes. Transcripts were then progressively analysed, with additional, reoccurring themes inductively added to the framework. The transcripts were analysed by the authors independently, and a subsample of transcripts were compared for reliability. This exercise revealed a high degree of consistency in coding and interpretation.

The findings from the case studies are reported in full in Hall and Webster (2022).

Presentation of findings

This paper draws together data from both Studies 1 and 2, and are presented in four parts. Firstly, we examine the role and contribution of TAs during the first full year of the pandemic. In the metric of the school year, this is the period from summer term 2020 to summer term 2021. We summarise the key results from the analyses of the numerical survey data, and use qualitative data from the open-ended responses and the semi-structured interviews to add colour and depth.

In the following three parts, we report principally on the interview data from Study 2. Part 2 considers if and how the role of the TA changed in the transition into the recovery phase and the school year that followed (2021/22). In the third part, we draw together some of the key messages from across the two studies, which attest to the impact that TAs had during the pandemic, and the way in which the pandemic seems to have precipitated a fundamental and permanent revision of their role. Finally, in Part 4, we explore the additional force of the UK's cost of living crisis,² which began to hit households during the recovery period, and how this has impacted TAs personally and schools' responses to recognising, rewarding and retaining TAs.

Findings

Part 1. The role and contribution of TAs during the first year of the pandemic

Supporting in school

Analysis of the survey data revealed how TAs were pivotal in allowing schools to keep functioning during the lockdowns. They played a vital role in supporting pupil learning in schools, while the vast majority of pupils and teaching staff were learning/teaching from home. During the lockdown of winter 2021, half of TAs reported covering staff absences, enabling schools to stay open to vulnerable children and children of keyworkers, and/or managing a whole class or bubble on their own. A quarter (26%) led larger classes. Half of TAs provided differentiated support to individual pupils. Around a third (35%) delivered targeted interventions; another third (34%) ran one-to-one and small group support sessions; and a further third (32%) provided bespoke support to pupils with a support plan (e.g. an Education, Health and Care Plan in England, or their equivalent in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). One in four TAs reported that, since the pandemic began, they had had fewer opportunities to work with the pupils they were most concerned about.

The interview data echoed these patterns of deployment and gave a deeper sense of the emotional support TAs provided to pupils. TAs reported being sensitive and responsive to pupils who were affected by the radical change and the unfamiliar experience of education and daily life, which was a cause of worry and anxiety for many of them.

There were children, 7 to 8 years old, who didn't know what Covid was [asking]: 'Why are our family members suddenly going into hospital and not coming back?' It was a tough time. It wasn't just about reading. It wasn't just about education. It was about sharing their feelings, sharing their tears.

TA

For children who attended school during the early months of the pandemic, the introduction of social distancing and hygiene/safety measures meant their day-to-day experience of school was markedly different. TAs described attempts to keep the learning environment light and stress-free, and engaging pupils in games and outdoor activities, rather than formal lessons.

Supporting families

TAs also played an important role in enabling pupils to carry on learning at home. Though largely unnoticed, TAs undertook a range of additional tasks to support remote learning, including: preparing hard copy learning packs (39% of survey respondents); liaising with families (36%); participating in live streamed lessons (34%); checking pupils had completed work set (31%); and offering support to pupils having difficulties with home learning (27%). One headteacher provided a vivid image of a TA standing in front gardens helping struggling parents/carers access remote learning on their laptops. While the survey data showed that 12% of all TAs delivered learning resources to homes, a much greater proportion (60%) of those working in schools in low socio-economic status areas reported carrying out this task.

The closer involvement TAs had with families in relation to supporting remote learning segued into wider welfare support. This function grew in significance as the pandemic wore on, both in terms of becoming a more prominent part of their role and an essential component in schools' response to supporting pupils and parents/carers in the community. TAs made home visits to vulnerable families to deliver work packs and provide general support to children and their parents from the doorstep.

It was evident from the interviews that the emotional and practical support TAs provided in the community in the early stages of the pandemic was, as one TA put it, 'not just for the children, but for the whole family'. TAs spent a lot of time checking in on parents/carers who were struggling to cope with the sudden uncertainty caused by the pandemic (e.g. financial strain and social isolation) and felt like they needed somebody to talk to.

We had mothers just crying on the phone. They were saying: 'We don't know what's happened. We need to get out. We need to talk to somebody'. We were saying: 'We are here'.

TA

TAs also provided practical support to families, such as delivering food parcels to homes and setting up food banks and clothes banks in school. One bilingual TA played a key role helping local families new to the UK to access financial support.

I was doing lots of applications for benefits, child benefits. . . for parents not being able to read and write in any language. They were relying on children. Children are able to speak [English], but sometimes it's hard for a child, who is 8 or 9 years old, to fill in a form which is 20-something pages.

TA

Part 2. The role and contribution of TAs during the Covid recovery period

A more intense and varied role

By the end of the summer term 2021, schools in the UK had fully reopened, marking the transition to what was colloquially called the 'recovery phase'. The extent and impact of 'lost learning' became immediately apparent. The government proselytised on the urgent need to get pupils back on track. Schools set about deploying TAs to support the 'catch-up' effort, despite the absence of any meaningful, practical government guidance on what role TAs should play in this.

TAs quickly became central to the delivery of targeted interventions to small groups. The increased rate and greater scale at which this occurred led the TAs we interviewed to describe their work and their workload as 'more intense' than anything they had ever experienced. In one school, TAs ran four interventions each morning to cope with demand, whereas pre-pandemic, they would have delivered two a day.

Oh yeah, definitely. . . to this day [spring 2022], we're still trying to fit more into the day in order to help with what some of the children have missed out on. And I think it's going to be like that for a while . . . Definitely into the next year.

TA

As the recovery phase went on, the deficit in other areas of pupils' development became clearer. Interestingly, around half of the TAs who responded to the Study 1 survey predicted that pastoral care and pupil wellbeing would be the priority areas to address post-lockdown. By the time the Study 2 interviews were conducted, it was clear that TAs in the case study schools had taken on an expanded child development/welfare function. In one school, for example, TAs were required to deliver toilet training workshops for infants, as they had not fully acquired these skills before starting school.

With local authority specialist services in high demand, TAs in most case study schools were needed to backfill for speech and language therapists. In a lot of cases, TAs retained the family support role they had assumed during the lockdowns. One TA continued to provide advice and support to parents/carers who approached them with 'health problems' and 'financial problems'.

TAs were evidently taking on or absorbing *additional* responsibilities to fit in alongside their instructional duties. The physical and emotional effort that this role switching demanded was not without consequence.

Truthfully, I think it's quite wearing actually... It must be quite draining... I think there'll probably be a level of fatigue [because of] that constant level of adaptability and flexibility of working in school.

Teacher

Part 3. A fundamental change

The data across the two studies provide compelling evidence that TAs were, in many ways, 'unsung heroes' of the first year of the pandemic. It is hard to see how schools could have managed without them during such an intense period of turbulence and uncertainty. The open-ended survey responses brought home how TAs working 'on the frontline' in schools took on a significant level of personal risk 'doing the dangerous face-to-face work', often without personal protective equipment. While exposure to Covid clearly played on TAs' minds, their commitment and impact was reflected in many of the comments from headteachers and teachers that took part in the interviews.

I don't know how we would have survived without them. They were totally invaluable to what we were able to offer to our [highly vulnerable] school community.

Headteacher

They did an amazing job with those longer hours and more responsibility... [We] wouldn't have been able to keep going [without them]. There's no question about that.

Teacher

Although a fifth (21%) of TAs who responded to the survey said that their role had remained the same during the lockdowns, the evidence from across the two studies suggests that the pandemic had precipitated a fundamental and seemingly permanent revision of their role.

Our role from 2020 to this day ... has changed. It's properly changed, and I think it's going to continue.

TA

I remember two parents who I was speaking to asked: 'What's the TA's job? Oh, are they just helpers?' I thought, Oh my God, helpers?! No. It's changed.

TA

The most marked change to the TA role appeared to be the emergence of a welfare and family support function, which was added to their existing duties. Several interviewees likened this to the role of a social worker.

The survey also revealed that nearly one in four TAs (38%) had been asked to do new things during the pandemic without training. The lack of training to support TAs in their transition into their new roles prompted anxieties about

being suitably prepared, experienced or qualified to provide specialist forms of support.

I don't have the training to be a counsellor for parents . . . or be a social worker . . . I have no idea what to do.

TA

Part 4. Recognising, valuing and retaining TAs

TAs, schools and the cost of living crisis

While Study 2 planned to explore the role and contribution of TAs in relation to Covid recovery, the UK's cost of living crisis emerged as a strongly contingent and highly consequential context within which almost every interviewee wanted to discuss the evolution of the TA role and their essentialness to schools. In every case study school, the fall in real earnings income was biting hard. The widespread media coverage of this at the time of the interviews (spring/summer 2022) was doubtless a factor in the present and predicted effects of the crisis being uppermost in TAs' minds.

I'm not sure if I'm going to be here next year, because this job doesn't [pay enough]. I'd love to stay, but the money's just not good enough.

TA

I do think this industry is going to have a problem keeping TAs . . . because of the wages. I'm thinking of changing and just doing anything that can bring in some more income.

TA

On the one hand, the interview data paint a picture of schools unable to function fully without TAs. Yet there was evidence that for a notable proportion of TAs, continuing in their post was rapidly becoming unsustainable. The retention and recruitment of TAs was matter of substantial concern to headteachers. Pressures relating to the rising cost of living were leading TAs to consider leaving for better paid work (supermarkets were frequently cited as an option) and speculation that the role was being rendered unattractive to jobhunters, because of its low pay and limited prospects.

It's becoming increasingly difficult for TAs to survive, to work, because the pay is so low. I don't want to say the obvious, but the pay is terrible.

Headteacher

They just find the travel really difficult, because it's an hour each way [and] it's very expensive.

Headteacher

I think we will start haemorrhaging TAs. Not only here, but in other places, because you can get paid more money in the supermarket.

Headteacher

[People] don't see it as a career. It's like it was a job while they were between 20 and 23. It's a good stepping-stone . . . but it's not going to be a career option, because it doesn't earn enough money to be able to get married, buy a house, have a child, all those other things that people are looking forward to.

Headteacher

Strategies

Despite the central contribution TAs had made to keeping schools open and functioning during the lockdowns, only around a quarter (27%) of survey respondents considered that their own school had become more aware of the TA role in supporting pupils and families. This finding prompted one of the aims of Study 2, which was to identify examples of what good schools do to recognise, value, incentivise and ultimately retain their TAs.

Given the choice, headteachers would have liked to have increased TAs' wages, but this was all but impossible. One headteacher, for example, described the acute financial difficulties some TAs were facing and had wanted to offer small donations to help with their energy bills at home. However, they recognised that this would be hard to justify given governance guidelines and, with the school also facing higher bills, restrictions on the organisational budget.

School, then, had little option but to use creative, low cost strategies to recognise and show their appreciation of TAs. One approach that worked well to maintain morale was 'wellbeing days'. Each school had its own variation of this approach, ranging from a day off with pay, to providing spa sessions or hotel-style breakfasts.

Our next training day, all our TAs and our support staff have got the day off. So, we recognise that we do ask a lot of our TAs, and the pay, unfortunately, isn't amazing. So, we have to find other ways to keep them motivated and to keep them coming to work, to be honest. So, the day off goes a long way.

Deputy headteacher

Wellbeing day is valued . . . as a way to acknowledge [TAs]. In November, when it's dark and miserable, having a long weekend. That does benefit the health of people.

Headteacher

The most effective strategies for recognising and valuing TAs, however, involved integrating TAs into the school community and school processes, such as lesson planning, and investing in and supporting their development as classroom professionals.

In early years, we work very much as a team. . . When I plan, I don't just plan myself. I ask my TAs: 'What do you think we should do? What activities? Do you think this has gone well?' I think it's really important to involve them in that because then they feel part of the setting.

Teacher

I think it's just to really listen to the staff because some of the schools I've been in, the TAs have kind of been dismissed. We're really just as valued as the teachers and it comes across in that way. Our opinions are taken into account.

TA

The main thing is to know the value of support staff, and what they can really contribute and not underestimate what they can contribute. Because a lot of them they have these skills, which are untapped unless you spend the time, finding out, believe in them, and give them the opportunities to show what they can do and support them through that. To me, I think that is the biggest thing that [other schools] can do because it will give you a happy workforce as well.

Headteacher

Several case study schools provided practical help and advice to TAs embarking on the journey to becoming a qualified teacher. With limits on how far TAs can progress in a paraprofessional role, and the cap on potential earnings that comes with this, efforts to encourage and support TAs into teaching had short-term personal benefits (feeling valued) and wider long-term benefits (adding to the teacher workforce).

When I applied for my teacher training everyone. . . all the senior leadership team, they were all so invested in me getting it and applying for it. They were like 'let me help with your application', loads of them did references for me, and they were really keen to have me. So, they just made me feel really valued.

TA

They're really positive with their language as well. [SEND coordinator] said to me the other day: 'Your relationships with the kids are so fantastic, I can't wait to see what you're going to do as a teacher'. It's just that constant positive reinforcement, which is obviously good for anyone, isn't it?

TA

Discussion

This paper reports on data from two studies of the role and impact of TAs between early 2020 and summer 2022, when education worldwide was destabilised by the pandemic. Our analyses of these datasets offer evidence of a fundamental and potentially permanent change to the role of TAs in mainstream primary schools in England.

The findings of the analysis presented here are consistent with, and build on, research by Moss et al. (2021) that show how the preventive measures put in place by the UK government to arrest the spread of Covid, and which limited families' access to key public services, resulted in schools stepping forward to play a central role as sources of welfare support within communities. This paper adds to emerging empirical research about how schools responded to the pandemic and the immediate and longer-term impacts of lockdowns and Covid, by putting on record the unique and vital role TAs played during this period, as key agents of schools' welfare provision.

Taking a wider view, what is striking about these findings is that despite TAs' reports of the pandemic precipitating a fundamental change to their role, the contextual factors on which their value, identity and status are contingent remain intact and unimpacted by the pandemic. Only 27% of TAs who responded to the survey felt that their own school had become more aware of their role in supporting pupils and families. This suggests that in the majority of schools, the increase in the welfare component of TAs' role had not, or had not yet, been fully processed. The way in which the tide of pandemic turbulence had not fully receded before schools were hit by the incoming wave of a cost of living crunch goes some way to explaining why, despite their pivotal role throughout Covid, one in two TAs report feeling undervalued (Unison, 2021).

There can be little doubt that the rising cost of living compounds matters. With living costs outpacing the income of 98% of school support staff – and with some taking on second or third jobs, and even using food banks (GMB, 2022; Unison, 2022) – the findings from our analysis add to the growing evidence of the human cost of this latest national crisis. The impact of the brewing retention and recruitment challenge is already evident in the sharp increase of head-teachers reporting cuts to TA posts (Montacute, 2023), difficulties recruiting TAs to support pupils with SEND (Ofsted, 2022), and TAs feeling 'forced out' of their roles because their pay is not enough to live on (Fazackerley, 2022, 2023). The knock-on effects are not difficult to predict. Significantly fewer TAs will have serious implications for maintaining SEND provision, as well as trigger a wider teacher workload and retention crisis.

Despite finding innovative ways to demonstrate their appreciation of, and investment in, TAs, schools' efforts, though genuine and well-meaning, do not amount to a robust retention strategy. The most effective approaches identified in Study 2 were those that recognised the TAs' status and contribution as classroom professionals. Large scale research is needed in order to explore to what extent these strategies could mitigate some of the effects described above.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the studies behind the analysis reported here. Firstly, though large in size, the Study 1 sample makes no claims to

representativeness. The on-the-ground circumstances of Covid in schools and the limited resources available combined to work against achieving a representative survey. Secondly, the fact that the majority of respondents were members of a UK trade union may affect the interpretation of the data. Thirdly, Study 2 was a small scale study involving an opportunistic sample of five mainstream primary schools in England, which restricts the generalisability of the findings. Further research would be needed to confirm the extent to which the experiences reported here translate across geographical locations and/or are replicated in secondary schools and special schools. That said, there is perhaps enough supporting evidence, as cited in the discussion above, to suggest that our findings resonate more widely.

Implications and recommendations

While the research is limited in terms of its scale and representativeness of schools and TAs, it offers an indicative insight into the changing role of the TA, and its impact on schools and TAs themselves. It indicates a clear need for expansive research to explore the issues raised in the present study and to inform policy and practice. Beyond this, we make two recommendations: one for policymakers and one for schools.

Many TAs have had to develop a broader range of skills to deal with the issues that the pandemic has created for pupils and families. Many TAs are now facing financial pressure and thinking of leaving their jobs. The schools sector needs to avoid a talent drain, not just because schools are in urgent need of staff with these skills; but also, because this loss would expose teachers to significant additional workload and stress, which would doubtless exacerbate the workforce retention crisis. Tackling a potentially disastrous TA retention crisis would be a proactive and welcome intervention. We can only echo the long-standing, and increasingly urgent, calls for improving TAs' pay. Alongside this, we recommend that policymakers consider drawing up a national strategy for TAs. A comprehensive package of investment in the TA workforce should include increased funding and pathways for upskilling TAs, and incorporate a fully-funded route into teaching designed specifically for TAs, and which recognises, values and builds on their skills, knowledge and classroom experience.

Much of what schools achieve would be unimaginable without TAs, yet all too often their work goes unnoticed and unremarked. Study 2 went in deliberate search of actions that good schools take to recognise and incentivise their TAs. While 'feelgood' gestures have a part to play in boosting morale, fully including TAs in school processes and investing in their development emerged as cost-effective and sustainable measures that can contribute to retaining TAs. School leaders, therefore, may wish to develop approaches that integrate TAs into its community of professionals as a way of encouraging them to stay in post as the cost of living crisis continues.

Conclusion

This paper adds to the empirical record of how schools in England responded to the disruption caused by the pandemic. It has described the role and impact of TAs, and the contribution they made to keeping schools functioning and providing essential welfare support, both in school and the wider community. The evolution of their role seems lasting, insofar as TAs have retained a pastoral/welfare function as life and learning has returned to normal. Yet, this seems to have gone largely unnoticed by the leaders and teachers they work alongside.

The dominant force of the pandemic has determined so much about schools', teachers', TAs', pupils' and families' recent lived experiences. In the UK, this context has given way to a cost of living crisis, which poses a new and serious threat to the TA workforce and schools more widely. While schools can and do find ways to recognise, value and retain their TAs, an increase in pay, as part of a comprehensive national development strategy, offers a more visible and sustainable (and overdue) response to resolving longstanding issues concerning their role ambiguity, sense of identity and value.

Notes

1. A very small number of secondary schools responded to the expression of interest, though we were unable to recruit any of them to the study.
2. From late 2021, prices for many essential goods began increasing faster than household incomes, resulting in a fall in real incomes. Economists widely agree that the causes of the UK cost of living crisis are a rise in inflation, plus the economic impact of Covid, Brexit and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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