

Covering the gaps: Teaching assistants, lesson cover, workforce pressure and displaced support in mainstream schools

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Abstract

This article examines the deployment of teaching assistants (TAs) to cover classes in place of teachers in mainstream schools. Drawing on survey data from over 8000 support staff in England, the analysis focuses on the scale, character, reported reasons and consequences of TA-led cover. The article conceptualises lesson cover as a site through which wider workforce pressures are absorbed and redistributed within schools. It uses the concept of 'organisational triage' to describe how schools allocate limited staffing capacity to immediate and visible demands under constrained conditions. The findings suggest that TA-led cover is common and often substantial: two-thirds of TAs reported covering classes as part of their role, and among those who covered on their most recent working day, the estimated mean duration was 2 h 41 min. Reported reasons for cover included planned release, short-term absence and wider staffing pressures, including unfilled vacancies and shortages of usual cover staff. The analysis also shows that when TAs were deployed to cover classes, pupils missed out on classroom support, one-to-one support linked to an Education, Health and Care Plan, curriculum interventions and therapy sessions. The article argues that while TA-led cover can address the immediate problem of an uncovered class, it can displace support elsewhere. The article concludes that lesson cover should be understood as both a workforce issue and a provision issue, with implications for school workforce policy, TA deployment and inclusive mainstream education.

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KEYWORDS

lesson cover, school workforce, SEND support, teaching assistants

Key insights**What is the main issue that the paper addresses?**

The paper draws on data from a large-scale survey to examine how schools in England deploy teaching assistants to cover classes in place of teachers, and what this reveals about workforce pressure, role boundaries and the forms of pupil support that are missed when TAs are redeployed.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Teaching assistant-led cover is common, occupies a substantial part of the day and is not always aligned with national guidance. Cover can operate as organisational triage, addressing the immediate problem of an uncovered class. However, this creates knock-on effects for pupil support in terms of missed classroom and one-to-one support.

BACKGROUND: TA-LED COVER AND WORKFORCE PRESSURE

The English education system is unusual internationally in the size of its teaching assistant (TA) workforce (OECD, 2024). TAs comprise 30% of the overall school workforce in England and 38% of the workforce in primary schools (DfE, 2026). The distinctiveness of England's TA workforce relates not only to its size, but also to how TAs are deployed. Unlike in many education systems internationally, schools in England can deploy TAs to cover classes in the absence of teachers. This practice was formalised during the mid-2000s as part of a policy response to concerns about excessive teacher workload and its consequences for recruitment and retention (DfES, 2003). This article examines TA-led cover as one mechanism through which mainstream schools manage staffing pressures, and asks what forms of support may be displaced when TAs are redeployed to maintain classroom provision.

The expansion of TA-led cover was intended, in part, to reduce the extent to which teachers were required to cover classes for absent colleagues, thereby easing workload. Early evidence suggested some positive impacts on teacher workload, stress and job satisfaction (Blatchford et al., 2009; Hutchings et al., 2009). However, the workforce conditions that prompted these reforms have not been resolved. Two decades on, teacher recruitment targets are repeatedly missed, retention remains a continuing policy concern and workload remains a dominant driver of work-related dissatisfaction (DfE, 2023, 2024, 2025a; McLean et al., 2023, 2024; McLean & Worth, 2025; Worth & Scott, 2026). At the same time, increasing costs have reduced schools' capacity to use external supply teachers (Joyce & Stuart, 2025; Martin & Norden, 2023; Norden, 2024). Together, these pressures help explain why TA-led cover has become a key mechanism through which schools manage staffing

gaps, sometimes under conditions that appear to sit uneasily with the original distinction between cover supervision, specified work and teaching.

These issues need to be understood in the context of pressure on the TA and wider support staff workforce. Recent evidence suggests that schools increasingly struggle to recruit and retain TAs and other support staff, with pay, workload, limited progression, low morale and feeling undervalued contributing to dissatisfaction and attrition (CFE Research, 2024; Thomas et al., 2026; Scott & Worth, 2026). Where schools have fewer support staff, or where remaining staff are stretched across more pupils and tasks, the redeployment of TAs to cover classes may carry sharper trade-offs for classroom support, targeted interventions and support linked to SEND provision.

These developments matter because TA-led cover is not only a mechanism for managing teacher absence; it can also have consequences for the support TAs would otherwise provide. Recent research suggests that, where TAs are deployed in response to teacher shortages, this can divert them from activities where evidence suggests they can add most value, increase workload and disrupt provision for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (Webster, 2024a, 2024b). The issue is not only whether cover is permissible, but also what happens elsewhere in the school when TA labour is reallocated.

Cover supervision, specified work and role boundaries

To assess these issues, it is necessary first to clarify the policy framework that defines and constrains TA-led cover. The option to deploy support staff to cover classes was formalised through the workforce reforms commonly referred to as the National Agreement (DfES, 2003). The framework introduced and promoted two support roles – higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) and cover supervisors – and distinguished between two forms of support staff-led cover: cover supervision and specified work (UNISON, 2009). These distinctions were intended to protect teachers' professional remit while setting limits on the circumstances in which support staff could lead whole classes. They also created a practical framework through which schools could manage teacher absence and planned release without requiring teachers to routinely cover for absent colleagues.

Cover supervision refers to cover arising from short-term teacher absence, whether anticipated, such as training, or unanticipated, such as sickness. It involves pupils completing work set by a teacher under the supervision of a TA or cover supervisor, with an expectation that 'no active teaching is taking place' (UNISON, 2009, p.17). Specified work describes the planning, preparation and delivery of lessons on a routine basis, for example, as part of arrangements for planning, preparation and assessment (PPA). It involves an 'appropriate' member of support staff delivering a lesson planned by, or in collaboration with, a teacher (*The Education (Specified Work) (England) Regulations*, 2012).

The boundary between supervision, support and teaching is not always clear in practice. The term 'active teaching' appears in the policy and guidance context as a way of distinguishing cover supervision from specified work (UNISON, 2009), but it is not elaborated in ways that fully resolve the boundary between supervision, support and teaching. Supporting pupils to complete work set by a teacher may involve explanation, questioning, behaviour management and adaptation to pupils' needs. This article does not seek to resolve whether such activity should be understood as 'teaching' in a pedagogical or professional sense. Instead, it examines the extent to which TAs' reported activity in class cover contexts aligns with the categories used in national guidance, particularly cover supervision, specified work and active teaching.

The distinctions between cover supervision and specified work were subsequently reflected in national support staff role profiles developed by the National Joint Council (NJC).

The profiles recommended cover supervision as a Level 3 role undertaken by TAs and cover supervisors, and specified work as a Level 4 or 5 role undertaken by TAs and higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) (NJC, 2003, 2013), aligning with the roles introduced under the National Agreement.

A further issue concerns how this framework interacts with teachers' contractual protection from routine cover. In principle, the 'rarely cover' provision in the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document (STPCD) and the arrangements governing support staff-led cover are complementary. If teachers should provide cover 'only rarely and only in circumstances that are not foreseeable' (DfE, 2025b, p.53), schools must rely on other arrangements to manage most planned release and much day-to-day absence, including cover supervision and specified work by suitably deployed support staff. In practice, however, this creates an asymmetry: teachers have a named contractual protection against routine cover, while support staff have no equivalent right. Under conditions of workforce strain, this asymmetry may increase the likelihood that support staff become a key source of internal flexibility for managing cover when other options are limited.

EVIDENCE ON TA-LED COVER AND DISPLACED SUPPORT

The extent to which these distinctions have been sustained in practice has been questioned since the early implementation of the reforms. Research suggests that school practice on TA-led cover moved beyond the intended boundaries of national guidance relatively quickly after its introduction in the mid-2000s. This evidence spans school phases, although the issues present slightly differently in primary and secondary schools because of differences in staffing models, curriculum organisation and the distribution of TA roles. Following an initial period of attention, cover has received limited sustained scrutiny from either policymakers or researchers, despite evidence that it became widespread and that unsupported deployment practices were reported.

Early studies suggested TA-led cover had become a common feature of school practice. A survey of HLTAs found many took whole classes regularly (Wilson et al., 2008), while a large-scale mixed-methods study reported that over 80% of schools deployed TAs to cover classes (Hutchings et al., 2009). An inquiry in Wales later estimated that just under 10% of lessons were covered by someone other than the usual class teacher (Estyn, 2013).

While this work suggested TA-led cover could mitigate some immediate effects of teacher absence, it also pointed to important limitations and trade-offs. Research found only mixed evidence that cover improved continuity for pupils and raised concerns about lesson pace, expectations and academic progress (Estyn, 2013; Hutchings et al., 2009). Evidence from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project helps explain why this may be so. It suggested that teachers tended to set less demanding work for cover lessons, and that TAs often entered cover without a lesson plan or briefing from a teacher (Blatchford et al., 2009; 2012).

The literature also points to the practical difficulty of sustaining the distinction between cover supervision and 'active teaching'. Supplementary guidance supporting the implementation of cover arrangements acknowledged that cover supervision could 'very quickly become specified work [where] active teaching would be required' (UNISON, 2009, pp. 17–18). Hancock et al. (2010) argued that this distinction is especially difficult to maintain in a typical primary classroom. Similarly, TAs in the DISS project reported that covering classes inevitably involved a pedagogic element (Blatchford et al., 2012), while 30% of support staff in the study by Hutchings et al. (2009, p. 11) reported that they 'regularly *taught* the class, delivering a complete lesson' [emphasis added]. More recently, around three-quarters of respondents to an NEU survey described cover as 'teaching' (NEU, 2023). Taken together, this

evidence suggests not simply inconsistent compliance with national guidance, but a more fundamental ambiguity in the categories through which cover is described and regulated.

National evidence remains limited, but two DfE-funded surveys provide broad indicators. A 2025 survey of support staff and a 2023 survey of TAs both found around seven in ten TAs supervised classes in the teacher's absence (Thomas et al., 2026; CFE Research, 2024).

More recent detailed evidence comes from the author's study of nearly 6000 TAs in England and Wales. That study found that cover often took place under challenging conditions, including short notice, limited support, no additional pay and expectations to teach. It also pointed to knock-on effects for TA workload, wellbeing and the continuity of classroom support and intervention work for pupils with SEND (Webster, 2024a, 2024b).

The present article builds on this earlier work but differs in three respects. First, it draws on a larger 2026 survey of support staff in England, allowing TA-led cover to be examined alongside evidence on other support staff roles. Second, it focuses specifically on mainstream primary and secondary schools, where current policy debates about SEND inclusion make the stability of TA support especially salient. Third, it develops an analytic framing of cover as organisational triage, examining how staffing pressure may be absorbed through TA redeployment and redistributed into less visible forms of pupil support.

This matters because ambiguity around class cover is not a marginal operational issue but a wider workforce issue. Clarifying the role of TAs and other support staff in covering classes is directly connected to professional status, workload distribution and the capacity of mainstream schools to sustain support for pupils with SEND.

Taken together, the available evidence suggests that TA-led cover is no longer simply a temporary response to teacher absence. It is a point at which workforce pressure, role boundaries, workload and support for pupils intersect in everyday school practice. The present article examines this intersection through the concept of organisational triage.

ORGANISATIONAL TRIAGE

The focus on lesson cover in mainstream schools is timely because recent policy debate has placed renewed emphasis on improving the inclusion of pupils with SEND in primary and secondary settings and reducing reliance on specialist placements. TAs deliver mainstream support, including in-class assistance, targeted curriculum interventions and one-to-one support linked to Education, Health and Care Plans. Where TAs are redeployed to cover classes, the issue is therefore not only the maintenance of classroom provision in the covered lesson, but also the support that may be displaced elsewhere, particularly for pupils whose access to mainstream learning depends in part on the availability and consistency of adult support. The focus on mainstream primary and secondary schools is therefore deliberate, as these are the settings in which policy ambitions for inclusive provision, teacher workforce pressures and TA deployment practices intersect.

The article conceptualises lesson cover as a site through which wider workforce pressures are absorbed and redistributed within schools. It uses the term 'organisational triage' analogically, rather than as a claim that schools follow a formal triage procedure. Its value lies in drawing attention to constrained prioritisation: where organisations face competing demands and limited capacity, immediate and visible problems may be prioritised over less visible forms of provision. In this sense, the concept draws together existing concerns in the literature about workforce remodelling, TA deployment, the blurring of roles and the organisation of support for pupils with SEND (Blatchford et al., 2012; Hutchings et al., 2009; Webster, 2024a, 2024b). In the context of lesson cover, an uncovered class presents an urgent organisational problem. The analytic question is what support may be deferred, reduced or displaced when available staff are allocated to that immediate need. Where teacher absence, unfilled vacancies, supply

constraints or shortages of usual cover staff reduce the options available, redeploying TAs may be a pragmatic response and, in some circumstances, one of the few available options. However, if TAs' usual duties are not backfilled, the immediate pressure associated with an uncovered class may be displaced onto less visible forms of provision, including targeted interventions, classroom support and one-to-one support.

The article addresses four research questions:

1. How are TAs deployed for lesson cover in mainstream primary and secondary schools, and how far does this align with national expectations around cover supervision, specified work and role level?
2. What reported reasons are associated with TA-led cover, and what do these suggest about how staffing capacity is managed in schools?
3. How do patterns of TA-led cover differ between primary and secondary schools?
4. What forms of pupil support or planned provision are reported as missed when TAs are deployed to cover classes?

In answering these questions, the article contributes to research on school workforce policy, TA deployment and inclusive education by showing how staffing pressures may be managed through the reallocation of TA labour, and how this may shift pressure from the visible problem of class cover to less visible forms of pupil support. The following section describes the 2026 survey on which the empirical analysis is based.

METHODS, SAMPLE AND ANALYSIS

Survey design and recruitment

The study used an online survey questionnaire consisting of closed-ended items to generate descriptive numerical data on support staff-led class cover. The survey was commissioned and funded by UNISON and administered by Ipsos UK. The survey instrument was designed by the author, who also carried out the analysis reported here.

The survey was conducted between late February and mid-March 2026 as part of a wider study of support staff work in schools in England, the full findings from which are reported in Webster (2026a). The study used a non-probability convenience sample of support staff working in state schools in England. Recruitment took place through two routes: invitations emailed to UNISON members working as school support staff, and invitations to respondents from the June 2025 DfE support staff survey who had consented to be contacted about further research.

Participation was voluntary and self-selecting. Respondents were provided with information about the purpose of the study before completing the survey, and responses were analysed anonymously and reported only in aggregate form. Information on whether individuals undertook class cover was not available at recruitment, and the survey was framed as a broad study of support staff work, with class cover forming only one part of the questionnaire. This reduces, but does not remove, the risk that participation was driven solely by respondents' experience of cover.

Sample and analytic focus

The wider survey included the main school support staff role groups because its purpose was to examine support staff work as a whole. For the purposes of this article, TAs remain

the primary group of interest because they are most directly associated with classroom support, targeted provision and support staff-led cover. Other support staff are included in a limited way to examine whether cover demands extended beyond teaching and learning support roles.

The wider survey received 8186 responses. This article restricts analysis to respondents in mainstream primary and secondary schools, producing an unweighted analytic sample of 7231 respondents. Special schools, alternative provision and pupil referral units are excluded from the analyses presented in this paper because their staffing models, pupil profiles and support arrangements differ from mainstream settings. This narrower focus reflects the article's concern with how lesson cover interacts with the organisation of mainstream classroom teaching, targeted support and inclusive provision. Results on special schools are available in the full research report (Webster, 2026b).

Respondents were classified by role using the category system developed for the 2025 DfE support staff survey. Respondents first selected a broad support staff category and, where relevant, a more specific role; these detailed roles were then reaggregated into the five NJC job families: teaching and learning support; pupil support and welfare; specialist and technical; administration and management; and facilities. A sixth category captured respondents whose role did not fit within these job families.

For the purposes of this article, this sixth category was combined with the four non-teaching and learning support job families to create an overarching 'other support staff' category. Together with teaching and learning support roles, abbreviated hereafter to 'TAs' for ease of reporting, this produced the binary classification of TAs and other support staff used in the analysis.

The TA group includes cover supervisors, whose role is specifically dedicated to class cover. Their inclusion may marginally elevate some cover-related estimates. They are retained because the classification follows the NJC teaching and learning support job family used in the survey and weighting scheme. They also form only a very small part of the sample and are unlikely to affect the overall pattern of findings.

Weights were applied to improve alignment between the achieved sample and the known composition of the school support staff workforce in England. Target weights were derived from the School Workforce Census and applied using interlocking weights by school phase and role type, following the approach used in the DfE support staff survey (Thomas et al., 2026). Part of the present study sample was recruited from respondents to that survey who had consented to be contacted about further research. Weighted percentages and means are reported unless otherwise stated.

Table 1 shows the weighted composition of the primary and secondary sample by role and school phase. In this and subsequent tables, unweighted bases are reported beneath the table. Because percentages are weighted and bases are unweighted, percentage shares do not necessarily correspond closely to raw respondent numbers. Percentages may not sum to 100% because of rounding, multiple responses, or the exclusion of 'don't know', 'prefer not to say' and missing responses.

Survey items and analytic categories

The survey asked TAs and other support staff about the amount of time they spent covering classes in place of teachers, the reported reasons for this cover and the extent to which their experiences aligned with national expectations associated with cover supervision and specified work. Because respondents may not have been familiar with the formal labels of cover supervision and specified work, the survey did not ask them to classify their work directly using those terms. Instead, it measured underlying characteristics of the

TABLE 1 Sample by role and school phase.

	Primary	Secondary	Total
Teaching and learning support staff (TAs)	51%	26%	44%
Other support staff	49%	74%	56%
Pupil support and welfare	27%	22%	26%
Specialist and technical	<1%	12%	3%
Admin and management	12%	23%	15%
Facilities	9%	15%	11%
Unclassified roles	1%	1%	1%
Total support staff	73%	27%	100%

Note: All respondents: 7231; Primary TAs: 3845; Secondary TAs: 588; Primary other support staff: 1061; Secondary other support staff: 1737. 'Other support staff' comprises pupil support and welfare, specialist and technical, admin and management, facilities, and unclassified roles. 'Unclassified roles' refers to the small residual group whose roles could not be mapped to an NJC job family. Percentages are weighted. The final row shows the weighted distribution of the analytic sample by phase.

cover undertaken, which were then used analytically as indicators of alignment with those categories.

The mapping between survey items and guidance categories was undertaken analytically. Reports of unplanned or short-notice cover were treated as indicators associated with cover supervision, while reports of planned or timetabled cover, including PPA-related cover, were treated as indicators associated with specified work. Reasons linked to unfilled vacancies, shortages of usual cover staff, long-term sickness and external supply constraints were grouped as workforce-pressure indicators. These categories were derived from the wording of national guidance and role profiles, but they should not be read as formal legal or contractual classifications of individual deployments. The analysis therefore assesses broad alignment between reported practice and guidance categories, rather than determining whether any specific instance of cover was contractually appropriate.

Several items focused on respondents' most recent working day. This anchored responses in a recent and specific episode of cover, rather than requiring respondents to generalise across longer periods. While no single day can be assumed to be typical for every respondent, these responses are treated as a cautious indicator of recent day-to-day cover practice across the sample. These items were used to estimate whether respondents had covered recently, the amount of time spent covering, the reported reasons for cover and whether pupils missed support or provision as a result.

The survey instrument closely mirrored the questions used in the 2024 study of TA-led cover to allow cautious consideration of continuity across studies. Direct comparison is limited, however, because the 2026 survey used a different achieved sample, included non-TA support staff, and was limited to schools in England, whereas the 2024 study focused only on TAs and included a small proportion of respondents from Wales.

Analysis

Analysis was descriptive. Weighted percentages and means were used to examine patterns of cover by role and school phase. However, statistical tests were not carried out because the study used a self-selecting, non-probability sample and was designed to describe reported patterns in the achieved sample rather than to make inferential claims about the wider support staff population. Differences between groups are therefore reported descriptively and should not be read as statistically significant.

The article focuses primarily on comparisons between mainstream primary and secondary schools. No causal claims are made; associations between reported reasons, cover practices and consequences are interpreted as descriptive patterns. Some subgroup analyses involving secondary TAs are based on relatively small, unweighted bases and should be interpreted cautiously.

RESULTS

The results are presented in five parts. The first describes the scale and character of TA-led cover, including phase differences in prevalence, type of cover and time spent covering. The second examines the reported reasons for TA-led cover, distinguishing between reasons associated with cover supervision, specified work and wider workforce pressure. The third considers how far TAs' reported experiences of cover aligned with key aspects of national guidance. The fourth examines reported instances in which support or planned provision was missed when TAs were deployed to cover classes. The final part considers, more briefly, whether class cover extended beyond TAs to other support staff roles.

Taken together, the results provide the empirical basis for the interpretation of lesson cover as organisational triage: the scale of TA-led cover, the reasons given for it, its relationship to guidance, and the forms of support or provision reported as missed when TAs covered classes.

The scale and character of TA-led cover

The first analyses examine how far lesson cover formed part of TAs' work. Survey respondents were asked whether they covered classes in place of a teacher as part of their role, regardless of whether this activity was formally included in their job description. The results indicate that cover was a common feature of TA work, but that its prevalence differed sharply by phase.

As shown in [Table 2](#), two-thirds of TAs reported covering classes as part of their role. This was much more common in primary schools, where nearly three-quarters of TAs (72%) reported undertaking cover, compared with a third of secondary TAs (33%).

Among respondents who reported covering classes, both cover supervision and specified work were common. In this analysis, reported unplanned or short-notice cover is treated as an indicator associated with cover supervision, while reported planned or timetabled cover is treated as an indicator associated with specified work. These are survey-based indicators associated with the national guidance rather than formal classifications of respondents' work. Almost all TAs who covered classes reported undertaking cover supervision (94%). Specified work was also common (81%), but less evenly distributed, ranging from 70% of secondary TAs to 82% of primary TAs.

The amount of cover undertaken also suggests that, for many TAs, cover was not a marginal task. Of those who covered classes, almost two-thirds (64%) had done so on their most recent working day, with primary TAs (65%) somewhat more likely to have covered than secondary TAs (57%).

Although the most recent working day cannot be assumed to represent all working days, these estimates suggest that TAs can spend substantial periods of the school day covering classes. Two in five primary TAs (40%) and half of secondary TAs (52%) who covered on their most recent working day had done so for 3 hours or more.

Approximate mean durations were also substantial. On the most recent working day, primary TAs who covered classes were estimated to have spent around 2h 40min doing

TABLE 2 TA-led cover.

	Primary	Secondary	Total
TAs who reported covering classes as part of role ¹	72%	33%	66%
TAs who undertook cover supervision ²	94%	94%	94%
TAs who undertook specified work ²	82%	70%	81%
TAs who covered classes on their most recent working day ²	65%	57%	64%
TAs who covered for 3+ hours on most recent working day ³	40%	52%	41%
Estimated mean duration of cover on most recent working day ³	2 h 40 m	2 h 50 m	2 h 41 m

Note: Percentages are weighted. 'Cover supervision' refers here to respondents reporting unplanned or short-notice cover; 'specified work' refers to respondents reporting planned or timetabled cover. These are survey-based indicators associated with the national guidance categories and should not be read as formal classifications of respondents' work. Categories are not mutually exclusive.

¹All TAs=4433; primary TAs=3845; secondary TAs=588.

²TAs who reported covering classes: all TAs=2977; primary TAs=2782; secondary TAs=195.

³TAs who covered on their most recent working day: all TAs=1919; primary TAs=1807; secondary TAs=112.

so, while the equivalent estimate for secondary TAs was around 2 h 50 min. These figures are approximate, but suggest that cover could occupy a substantial part of the working day.

Reported reasons for TA-led cover

The second set of analyses examines the reasons TAs reported for being deployed to cover. These data were collected by asking TAs who had covered on their most recent working day to indicate, as far as they were aware, why they had been deployed to cover. Response options referred to reasons why the teacher was unavailable to teach the class. These reasons were grouped analytically into three categories: reasons associated with cover supervision, reasons associated with specified work and workforce pressure reasons. Respondents could select more than one reason, so the percentages in [Table 3](#) describe the composition of all reasons reported, not the proportion of TAs who experienced each reason.

Using reasons rather than respondents as the denominator, specified work accounted for the largest share of reported reasons overall. Sixty per cent of reported reasons in primary schools fell into this category, compared with 30% in secondary schools. Release for PPA time was the most common specific reason in this category, accounting for 27% of all reported reasons, and was the most common specific reason in primary schools (28%) [[Table S1](#)].

Cover supervision accounted for 19% of reported reasons in primary schools, but for more than a third of reported reasons in secondary schools (35%). Short-term teacher sickness was the most common specific reason in this category, and the most common specific reason overall in secondary schools (20%) [[Table S1](#)].

Workforce pressures accounted for one-fifth of reported reasons overall (20%). This category was more prominent in secondary schools, where it accounted for 30% of reported reasons, compared with 19% in primary schools. The main specific reasons in this category were unfilled teaching vacancies (8% overall) and shortages of support staff who would

TABLE 3 Reported reasons for TA-led cover.

	Primary	Secondary	Total
Reasons associated with cover supervision	19%	35%	20%
Reasons associated with specified work	60%	30%	59%
Workforce pressures	19%	30%	20%
Other/miscellaneous reasons	3%	5%	3%

Note: TAs who covered on their most recent working day: all TAs = 1919; primary TAs = 1807; secondary TAs = 112. Percentages are weighted. Percentages show each category's share of all reasons reported, rather than the proportion of respondents who selected each reason. Respondents could report more than one reason. 'Cover supervision' and 'specified work' refer to analytic groupings of reported reasons for cover, based on their broad alignment with national guidance; they are not respondents' own classifications of the cover undertaken.

usually provide cover (6%). External supply constraints (3%) and long-term teacher sickness (2%) made smaller contributions overall, although long-term teacher sickness accounted for 9% of reported reasons in secondary schools [Table S1].

Taken together, these findings suggest that much TA-led cover was associated with planned release and short-term absence. However, a meaningful minority of reported reasons was linked to wider staffing pressures. This pattern was more pronounced in secondary schools, where workforce pressures accounted for a larger share of reported reasons.

Role-boundary pressure and alignment with guidance

The third set of analyses examines how far TA-led cover aligned with the activity boundaries and role-level expectations set out in national guidance. The analysis focuses on two indicators: whether TAs reported actively teaching when undertaking cover supervision, and whether TAs undertaking cover supervision or specified work were employed at NJC levels broadly consistent with those forms of cover.

The clearest indication of role-boundary pressure concerns the distinction between supervision and teaching. In national guidance, cover supervision refers to short-term teacher absence, where pupils undertake pre-prepared work under supervision and no active teaching is expected. However, the survey evidence suggests that this boundary was difficult to sustain in practice. Among TAs who undertook cover supervision, 71% reported that they often or always actively taught when doing so. This was especially common in primary schools, where almost three-quarters of TAs (74%) reported often or always actively teaching, compared with just over half of secondary TAs (52%). A further 22% of TAs reported sometimes actively teaching. Taken together, 6% reported rarely or never actively teaching during cover supervision.

The NJC-level analysis provides a second indication of partial alignment with guidance. As shown in Table 4, most TAs undertaking cover supervision who knew their NJC level were employed at Level 3 or above, the level most closely associated with cover supervision in the NJC role profiles. Overall, around a quarter (27%) were employed at Level 1 or 2, including more than one in four primary TAs (28%) and one in five secondary TAs (21%).

Alignment was more limited for specified work. In the NJC role profiles, specified work is most closely associated with Level 4 or 5 roles. However, just over a quarter of TAs undertaking specified work (26%) were employed at Level 4 or 5. This was more common among secondary TAs (46%) than primary TAs (24%). Overall, around three-quarters of TAs undertaking specified work were therefore employed below the levels most closely associated with this form of cover.

TABLE 4 NJC level of TAs undertaking cover supervision and specified work.

	Primary	Secondary	Total
Cover supervision			
Level 1 or 2	28%	21%	27%
Level 3	51%	42%	50%
Level 4 or 5	21%	36%	22%
Specified work			
Level 1 or 2	25%	17%	24%
Level 3	51%	38%	50%
Level 4 or 5	24%	46%	26%

Note: All TAs who covered classes and knew their NJC level: 2105. Primary: 1987; Secondary: 118. Percentages are weighted. Cover supervision and specified work are used as survey-based indicators, as described in the Methods section. For cover supervision, Level 3 or above is treated as broadly aligned with the NJC role profile expectations. For specified work, Level 4 or 5 is treated as broadly aligned.

These findings should not be read as evidence that individual deployments were necessarily inappropriate. Local role descriptions, staff experience, training and school-level circumstances may vary, and the survey did not capture the full context of individual cover episodes. However, the findings do suggest that reported practice did not always map neatly onto the formal distinctions between cover supervision, specified work and teaching. In particular, the data on actively teaching suggest that cover supervision often involved activity that TAs understood as extending beyond passive supervision. In this respect, the data point to role-boundary pressure: TAs were not only covering classes, but sometimes doing so in ways that sat uneasily with the activity boundaries and role levels set out in national guidance.

Displaced pupil support and provision

The fourth set of analyses examines whether pupils who typically receive support or planned provision from TAs missed out on that support or provision when TAs were deployed to cover classes. TAs who had covered classes on their most recent working day were asked whether, as a result of them covering, pupils had missed usual support in another class, one-to-one support linked to an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), scheduled curriculum interventions, or scheduled therapy sessions, such as speech and language therapy. Respondents could select more than one option.

As shown in [Table 5](#), reports of missed support and provision were more frequent in primary schools than secondary schools. The table presents phase-specific estimates because the analysis is concerned with differences between primary and secondary settings. Two in five primary TAs (41%) reported that pupils they usually supported in another class missed out on support as a result of them covering, compared with almost one in five secondary TAs (19%). Almost a third of primary TAs (31%) said that pupils with an EHCP missed one-to-one support, compared with 16% of secondary TAs.

The largest phase difference concerned curriculum interventions. Almost half of primary TAs (45%) reported that pupils missed a scheduled curriculum intervention, such as reading or phonics, compared with 5% of secondary TAs. Missed therapy sessions were less common, but were still reported by 12% of primary TAs and 2% of secondary TAs.

A follow-up question about rescheduling sessions was asked of TAs who reported that pupils had missed either a scheduled curriculum intervention or a therapy session because

TABLE 5 Reported effects of TA-led cover on pupil support and provision.

	Primary	Secondary
Pupils in another class missed support	41%	19%
Pupils with EHCP missed one-to-one support	31%	16%
Pupils missed curriculum intervention	45%	5%
Pupils missed therapy session	12%	2%

Note: Percentages are weighted. Respondents could select more than one option, so percentages do not sum to 100%. TAs who covered on their most recent working day: all TAs = 1919; primary TAs = 1807; secondary TAs = 112.

of cover. Among this subgroup, rescheduling was far from guaranteed. Overall, only 10% said the missed provision would be rescheduled, and a further 12% said it would most likely be rescheduled. By contrast, more than a quarter (27%) said it was unlikely to be rescheduled and almost half (46%) said it would not be rescheduled. This pattern was particularly clear in primary schools, where almost half of TAs (48%) said the missed provision would not be rescheduled and a further 27% said this was unlikely.

Taken together, these findings suggest that TA-led cover was associated with reported losses of support and planned provision beyond the class being covered, indicating a pattern of displaced support.

Cover beyond TAs

The final analyses consider whether cover extended beyond TA roles. While not the main focus of the article, this analysis addresses whether class cover was confined to teaching and learning support roles or drew on wider support staff capacity.

Although TAs remained the group most directly affected by cover, the survey found 14% of support staff in other roles reported covering classes as part of their role. Among those who covered, almost half (47%) had done so on their most recent working day.

Cover among other support staff was not evenly distributed across role groups. Almost one in four pupil support and welfare staff (24%) reported covering classes, as did one in five specialist and technical staff (20%). Although cover was far less common among staff in roles less directly associated with classroom provision, 5% of administrative staff and 1% of site and facilities staff reported covering classes as part of their role.

The reported reasons for cover also suggest that the involvement of other support staff was linked, in part, to wider staffing pressures. Among other support staff who covered on their most recent working day, workforce pressures accounted for over a quarter of reported reasons for cover (28%). This was higher than the equivalent share for TAs (20%).

Taken together, these findings suggest that cover was not always confined to the roles most directly associated with learning and classroom support. While TAs were more typically involved in cover, reports from other support staff suggest that schools sometimes drew on wider internal staff capacity when managing cover.

DISCUSSION

This article has examined TA-led lesson cover as a site through which schools manage workforce pressure. The findings from a large-scale survey suggest that cover is not a marginal or occasional part of TA work. Two-thirds of TAs reported covering classes as part of their role, and among those who covered, most reported undertaking both short-notice and planned forms of cover. Many had covered on their most recent working day, often

for substantial periods. These patterns indicate that lesson cover forms part of the routine organisation of TA labour in many schools. This is consistent with earlier evidence that support staff-led cover became a common feature of school practice after the workforce reforms of the mid-2000s (Hutchings et al., 2009).

The findings also show that TA-led cover cannot be understood only as a response to short-term teacher absence. Planned release, particularly for PPA, accounted for a large share of reported reasons for cover, especially in primary schools. Short-term sickness was more prominent in secondary schools. However, a meaningful minority of reported reasons were linked to wider workforce pressures, including unfilled teaching vacancies, shortages of staff who would usually provide cover, external supply constraints and long-term sickness. These data do not show the decision-making process through which schools allocate staff to cover, nor the full range of provision that may be affected in individual schools. They do, however, show that TA-led cover is reported in contexts where schools appear to be managing constrained cover options. This matters in a context of continuing teacher supply pressures and increasing concern about support staff recruitment and retention (Scott & Worth, 2026; Worth & Scott, 2026).

These patterns support the interpretation of lesson cover as organisational triage: not a formal strategy, but an observable allocation of limited staffing capacity to immediate and visible demands. An uncovered class creates a pressing problem that schools must resolve. Redeploying TAs may be a pragmatic response where teacher absence, unfilled vacancies, supply constraints or shortages of usual cover staff reduce the options available. The question raised by the findings is what happens elsewhere when TA labour is reallocated.

The results suggest that cover may redistribute, rather than resolve, staffing pressure. The reported effects on pupil support and provision were substantial, especially in primary schools. TAs reported that pupils missed support in another class, pupils with an EHCP missed one-to-one support, and scheduled curriculum interventions and therapy sessions were not delivered because they were covering classes. These findings indicate that the consequences of cover may be displaced into parts of school provision that are less immediately visible than an uncovered class. Although such effects may involve smaller groups of pupils, they are important for those whose needs require consistent provision and adult support. This extends findings from the author's earlier research on TA-led cover by identifying specific forms of support and provision reported as missed when TAs were redeployed (Webster, 2024a, 2024b).

The role-boundary findings reinforce this interpretation. National guidance distinguishes cover supervision from specified work, and associates these forms of cover with different role levels. Yet the survey suggests that these distinctions were inconsistently reflected in reported practice. Many TAs said they often or always actively taught during cover lessons, and a sizeable minority – including around one in four primary TAs – undertaking cover supervision or specified work were employed below the NJC levels most closely associated with those activities. These findings should not be read as evidence that individual deployments were necessarily inappropriate. The survey did not capture data on local role descriptions, contractual arrangements, managerial decisions or the precise circumstances of individual cover episodes. Nevertheless, the pattern suggests that the categories through which cover is formally regulated may be harder to sustain under current staffing conditions.

This role-boundary issue is not new. Supplementary guidance acknowledged that cover supervision could quickly become specified work where active teaching was required (UNISON, 2009), and earlier research reported blurred boundaries between supervision, support and teaching in support staff-led cover (Blatchford et al., 2012; Hutchings et al., 2009). The contribution of the present study is to show that these tensions remain visible in current reported practice and that they sit alongside evidence of displaced support and provision.

The involvement of other support staff extends this point. TAs remained the group most directly affected by cover, but cover was also reported by staff in other roles, particularly pupil support and welfare roles and specialist and technical roles. Again, this does not imply that all such deployments are inappropriate. It does, however, suggest that cover demands can draw on wider internal staffing capacity, beyond the roles most directly associated with classroom support. This lends further support to the interpretation of cover as a workforce-system issue rather than a discrete feature of TA deployment.

Although the present study is not directly comparable with the author's earlier survey of classroom cover (Webster, 2024a), the recurrence of similar themes is analytically important. Across both studies, TA-led cover emerges as substantial, blurred in relation to formal role boundaries and associated with disruption to usual TA work and pupil support. This points to a recurring issue in the organisation of staffing in schools.

This article contributes to debates on school workforce policy, TA deployment and inclusive education by showing how cover connects these domains. If TAs are central to delivering targeted interventions, classroom support and support for pupils with an EHCP, their redeployment to cover classes has implications beyond the lesson being covered. Under current workforce pressures, lesson cover appears to be one point at which the limits of staffing capacity are made visible. The article's contribution is therefore to show how cover can redistribute pressure from the visible problem of an uncovered class to less visible forms of pupil support and provision.

LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

The study has some clear limitations. The sample was non-probability and self-selecting, and the findings should not be read as precise population estimates. The data are based on self-report and cannot independently verify local role descriptions, contractual arrangements, managerial decisions or the precise circumstances of individual cover episodes. Respondents' interpretations of 'active teaching' may also have varied, so this item is treated as an indicator of perceived role-boundary pressure rather than as a definitive measure of pedagogical practice. Some subgroup bases, particularly for analyses involving secondary TAs, are relatively small. The analysis is therefore descriptive and does not make causal or inferential claims about the wider support staff population.

That said, the study has several strengths. It draws on a large survey of support staff and provides detailed descriptive evidence on an under-researched area of school workforce practice. Its measures allow analysis not only of whether TAs cover classes, but of the type, duration, reported reasons and consequences of that cover. The analysis also distinguishes between primary and secondary settings, uses weighting to improve alignment between the achieved sample and the known composition of the support staff workforce, and allows cautious consideration of whether similar themes recur across two separate studies.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

For decision-makers involved in school workforce policy, the findings suggest that TA-led cover should be treated as part of the wider organisation of school staffing, rather than as a marginal operational matter. The evidence does not support judgements about whether individual instances of cover were appropriate or inappropriate. Rather, it suggests that schools may be drawing on available internal capacity under constrained conditions. Policy

responses therefore need to address the conditions that produce reliance on TA-led cover, including teacher supply, external supply constraints, support staff role design and the asymmetry between teachers' protection from routine cover and support staff's more flexible deployment.

A second implication concerns the national framework governing support staff-led cover. The findings suggest that the distinction between cover supervision, specified work and teaching remains important, but may be difficult to apply consistently in current conditions. This points to a need for clearer and more workable guidance on the circumstances in which TAs may cover classes, the role levels associated with different forms of cover, and the training, preparation, support and pay expectations attached to regular or extensive cover. This issue is particularly relevant to current work on support staff role profiles, pay and conditions, where cover sits at the intersection of deployment, grading, workload and professional recognition.

For schools and trusts, the findings suggest that cover decisions need to be considered not only in relation to the covered class, but also in relation to support displaced elsewhere. This does not imply that schools can always avoid redeploying TAs; the data are consistent with the view that schools often operate under limited cover options. However, where TA-led cover is regular or substantial, school systems may need to monitor what happens to the support, interventions and inclusive provision that TAs would otherwise deliver or facilitate, especially for pupils with an EHCP.

Finally, the findings point to a need for further research. Survey evidence can identify broad patterns of reported practice, but it cannot show how school leaders make cover decisions in real time, how pupils experience the loss or substitution of support, or how cover affects learning, inclusion and staff retention over time. Qualitative data would be valuable in examining how cover decisions are made, how role boundaries are interpreted locally, how TAs, teachers and school leaders understand the boundary between supervision, support and teaching, and how schools weigh competing pressures when staffing capacity is limited. Further analysis could examine whether patterns differ by school characteristics, staffing profiles or local labour market conditions. Additional work is also needed in special schools, alternative provision and pupil referral units, where staffing models, pupil needs and cover arrangements may differ from those in mainstream schools.

CONCLUSION

TA-led cover is an important site for understanding how mainstream schools manage workforce pressure. The findings show that cover was common, often substantial, and not always clearly aligned with the role boundaries set out in national guidance. Much cover was associated with planned release and short-term absence, but a meaningful minority of reported reasons were linked to wider staffing pressures, and cover also extended beyond TAs into other support staff roles.

This article's central contribution is to show that cover can redistribute pressure within schools. Redeploying TAs can address the immediate problem of an uncovered class, but may also lead to missed classroom support, one-to-one support, interventions and therapy sessions elsewhere. TA-led cover is therefore not only a workforce issue but also a provision issue.

The concept of organisational triage helps explain this pattern without attributing blame to schools or assuming that cover decisions are straightforwardly avoidable. Under constrained conditions, schools may have few available options. The policy and research challenge is therefore to make visible the trade-offs that are currently absorbed within everyday staffing arrangements, and to consider how workforce policy, role guidance and inclusion

reform might better account for the support that is displaced when TAs are redeployed to cover classes.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Rob Webster: conceptualisation; methodology; formal analysis; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; project administration.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The research data are not publicly available as they were collected under conditions of participant anonymity and are subject to data-sharing restrictions agreed for the commissioned study. Aggregated findings are reported in this article and in the associated project report.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was approved by the University of Greenwich Research Ethics Board (reference: UREB2025_41). All participants gave informed consent before taking part. Data were supplied anonymously and analysed in aggregate. No directly identifying information about individuals or schools was collected.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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