Book Review
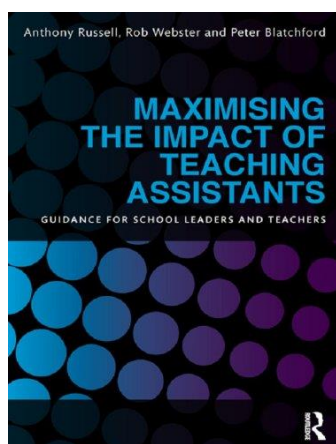
Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants: Guidance for school leaders and teachers

By Anthony Russell, Rob Webster, and Peter Blatchford
Abingdon: Routledge (2013).

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Reviewed by **Stephen Willoughby**

The title of this book is 'Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants' and it focuses on the school/class deployment, preparation and practice of teaching assistants' (TAs) roles including both pedagogic and non-pedagogic. There is an abundance of research and guidance on qualified teacher practice, particularly in relation to teaching and learning; however, there are few large studies into the roles of TAs. Hence, I am pleased that these particular authors summarise their research and give clear guidance for developing TA roles within schools. Moreover, their examination of TA roles is directly linked to school and classroom practices of qualified teachers. Their book moves towards a more rounded and inclusive view of teaching staff rather than focusing exclusively on the qualified teacher formal position.

The authors' summary of research contains two studies: the Development and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) and a later project, Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants (EDTA). DISS, a national study into TA school impact involved nearly 18,000 head teachers, qualified teachers and support staff interacting with 8,200 students. It is reported that there were systematic observations, work pattern diaries, transcripts and in-depth case studies. The main findings were that TAs tended to be directed to support Special Educational Needs (SEN) students rather than mixed ability groups. TAs are seen as the 'Velcro' for specific student behaviour and learning needs that can be educationally supportive or damaging. School and class deployment was unclear. Second, TAs in the study had limited preparation both in relation to continued professional development and on-going formal/informal classroom discussion with the qualified class teacher, limiting TAs awareness of student progress or lesson planning. Meetings with TAs were generally *ad hoc* and therefore interaction and communication was reduced. Thus the deployment, preparation and practice of TA work was unclear and problematic.

This finding led to the EDTA project, which involved schools in two local authorities and was funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The project used the DISS findings and examined the development of a Wider Pedagogic Role (WPR) for TAs beyond the support of SEN students. EDTA findings suggest that schools should audit and review the deployment, preparation and practice of TAs both in relation to non- and pedagogic roles. This book summarises the DISS project and focusses on the EDTA findings with questions, and possible recommendations. Questions include: What is the present use of TAs across the school and classroom? A recommendation

is to produce a clear and agreed strategy/policy for developing and monitoring TA role development requirements of the particular school environment.

This book is timely because there is limited research and guidance on TA roles within schools. The authors state that the number of full-time TAs within maintained schools trebled between 2007 and 2011 to 190,000 and that a national study was suitable and timely. This book has clarity, detail and a readable format for senior and classroom leaders. For example, the writers move through a summary of main research findings onto a description of auditing TA roles. This is followed by chapters on defining deployment, preparation and practice and a concluding section bring it all together. Furthermore, their model of TA role moves to a wider pedagogic view incorporating all students as potential receivers of TA support. For instance, TAs may be asked to give some support to students who have above average skills in academic subjects such as English, Mathematics or Science. Certainly in my own experience I found that the main pedagogic work was around the needs of SEN students. Finally, the writers talk about the need for better professional interaction between qualified teachers and TAs. For instance, it is argued that the interaction of Class Teachers and relevant TAs requires regular formal sessions within the week to discuss and feedback student progress, the effective joint delivery of lessons and planning. I agree that regular and formal/informal shared meetings are important. They allow the development of skills and expertise within the group and enhance effectiveness of TA/Teacher support for students and the strengthening of a positive school ethos.

A possible issue with the book for me, is that the research focusses on the position of the Senior and Class Teacher Leaders and what is required for effective TA roles. I agree with the authors that the TA role requires clear and careful development of audit, deployment, preparation and practice; however, where is the TA voice, and their understanding of their role and practice? The Senior Leadership and Qualified Teachers have leadership and authority but where are the views of TAs? The authors note that "Higher Level TA's may work with SENCO's termly to plan" (p.6), but I suggest that this is limited at best and certainly the WPR does not clearly detail the voice and possible disagreement of the wider group of TAs. I argue that this area is an important element of this type of model particularly when TAs develop an understanding of particular groups of students. Their detailed feedback and agreement is essential when developing complex WPR models within schools. Moreover, I suggest that professional development of TA work might require a single professional model of development where TAs can move from Senior TAs into qualified teacher status through regular school and external input.

I would recommend that schools buy and examine the materials in this book because it is extremely helpful; however, I would also argue that further research from the perspective of the TA is needed to balance this WPR model.