

The Making a Statement project – Executive summary

A study of the teaching and support experienced by pupils with a statement of special educational needs in mainstream primary schools

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Research from our previous Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project showed that the day-to-day support for pupils with special education needs (SEN) in mainstream schools is often provided by teaching assistants (TAs) instead of teachers. We have argued that this is one main reason why the negative effect of TA support on academic progress, found in the DISS project, is greater for pupils with SEN than for those without SEN.

The Making a Statement (MaSt) project was designed to explore the teaching, support and interactions experienced by pupils with statements of SEN – a topic on which there is little systematic information.

The MaSt project findings are based on results from extensive systematic observations and detailed case studies involving 48 pupils with statements of SEN for moderate learning difficulties or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Observations of 151 average attaining 'control' pupils provide a reference point for comparison. Case studies were based largely on interviews with nearly 200 teachers, TAs, SENCOs and parents/carers. All data were collected over the 2011/12 school year, and involved researchers shadowing pupils in Year 5 over one week each.

Spending a week at a time observing at close quarters, and discussion with practitioners and parents/carers, brought home how schools are making every effort to attend to the needs of pupils with statements amid a period of intense flux and uncertainty in schools and local authorities. However, quantitative and qualitative analyses identified five overarching concerns that capture the MaSt study's key results.

A high degree of separation and TA support strongly characterised the educational experiences of pupils with statements. Pupils with statements spent over a quarter of their time away from the mainstream class, the teacher and their peers. A clear point to emerge from the MaSt study was the almost constant accompanying presence of a TA in relation to all the locations in which pupils were placed. There is, in other words, an intimate connection between TAs and the locations, both in and away from the classroom, in which pupils with statements are taught. Compared to average attaining pupils, statemented pupils experienced less time in whole class contexts and a much higher degree of one-to-one interaction with TAs – often at the expense of interactions with teachers and peers.

TAs have more responsibility for pupils with statements than teachers. TAs had much of the responsibility for the planning and teaching of statemented pupils. Many TAs devised alternative curricula and prepared intervention programmes, and almost all TAs had a high level of responsibility for moment-by-moment pedagogical decision-making. Teachers rarely had as high a level of involvement in planning and teaching statemented pupils.

The appropriateness and quality of pedagogy for statemented pupils is unlikely to close the attainment gap. Compared to their average attaining peers, pupils with statements received a less appropriate and lower quality pedagogical experience. The support provided for these pupils – particularly by TAs – was clearly well intentioned, but seemed unlikely to be sufficient to close the attainment gap between them and their peers.

There are considerable gaps in teachers' and TAs' knowledge concerning meeting the needs of pupils with statements. Teachers and TAs felt under-prepared for dealing with the challenges and complex difficulties posed by pupils with statements. Most teachers reported having had no training on meeting the needs of pupils with high levels of SEN, indicating failings in initial teaching training. As TAs held valuable knowledge about the pupils they supported, teachers often positioned them as the 'expert', despite TAs having similar weaknesses in their knowledge and training.

There are concerns about the ways in which schools prioritise meeting the needs of pupils with statements. There was little evidence of an effective and theoretically-grounded pedagogy for statemented pupils. The specification on the statement of a number of hours of TA support seemed to get in the way of schools thinking through appropriate approaches for pupils with pronounced learning difficulties in mainstream primary schools.

Implications for practice

There are presently two full-time equivalent TAs for every three full-time equivalent teachers in English mainstream primary schools. Whilst the DISS project showed that investment in TAs has eased teacher workloads and stress, the inadvertent drift towards models of TA deployment that – though well meaning – have resulted in unintended and unsatisfactory consequences for pupils with SEN.

In common with the DISS project, the MaSt study provides further evidence that schools need to fundamentally rethink the common approaches to the ways TAs are deployed and prepared, if they are to get the best use from this valuable resource. School leaders and teachers need to think more inclusively about pupils with SEN, and ensure their learning needs are not met principally by TAs. Schools must address the issues of pupil separation that characterise the day-to-day experiences of pupils with SEN¹.

Implications for policy

The MaSt project was conducted as the coalition government plan the biggest changes to the SEN system in 30 years. The Children and Families Bill, which sets out the reforms, received its first reading in Parliament in early February 2013. The findings from the MaSt study have clear implications for two core elements of the proposed changes: the replacement of statements with Education and Health Care plans (EHCPs); and the introduction of personal budgets, which give parents/carers more control over their child's SEN funding.

In terms of EHCPs, a clear message from the MaSt project and the preceding DISS project is that the conversion of the hours specified on a statement into hours of TA support leads to practices that are both unlikely to close the attainment gap, and separates pupils from their teacher and peers.

On basis of the evidence from our research, we suggest that the new EHCPs avoid expressing support for pupils in terms of hours, and instead specify the pedagogical processes and strategies that will help meet carefully defined outcomes. Furthermore, we recommend that setting personal budgets is dependent on the outcomes specified in the EHCP in order to avoid schools making decisions about support based predominantly on the resources available.

¹ Our recently published book, *Maximising the impact of teaching assistants: Guidance for school leaders and teachers*, addresses precisely these issues concerning the effective use of TAs.