

Executive summary

Teaching on the cheap?: a report on teaching assistants covering classes and leading lessons

Introduction

Ongoing teacher shortages mean teaching assistants (TAs) are increasingly having to cover whole classes and to lead lessons. Major factors include schools not having enough teachers and being unable to get supply teachers as well as long-term illness among teachers.

The use of TAs to supervise classes was introduced in 2004 in cases of unexpected teacher absence. The policy intended supervision to be for limited periods but triggered concerns the reform could lead to '[teaching on the cheap](#)' as some TAs reported only being paid pennies for stepping up.

What's more, changes were introduced to tackle teacher workload in the mid 2000s. These allowed schools to deploy TAs to cover classes when teachers were unexpectedly absent, and to give teachers time away from the classroom for planning and marking.

Nearly two decades on, TAs are having to perform roles they are neither trained for nor paid to do, because of the teacher shortage crisis. This is despite national guidance stating TAs should not 'actively teach' the lessons and classes they cover.

TAs are plugging gaps in the teacher workforce at considerable cost. The expectation to teach, and covering unplanned teacher absences at short notice cause TAs stress and anxiety.

This can lead to them feeling undervalued, taken for granted, and undermines their sense of job satisfaction and wellbeing.

When TAs are diverted from their regular duties, pupils also miss out on support especially those with special educational needs. Covering for absent colleagues also has a negative impact on the quality of learning, as well as on a TA's workload.

TAs often find themselves teaching lessons to whole classes in conditions to which teachers would object. Unlike teachers, TAs are covering classes without additional support (from a TA) or a lesson plan.

The report calls on policymakers to revisit the national guidance on deploying TAs to cover classes, as well as ensuring they are paid appropriately for the work they do.

To investigate this worrying trend, UNISON commissioned a survey which presents a detailed picture of the extent to which TAs are covering classes in place of teachers.

The findings also show the impact of this extra workload on pupils, schools and TAs themselves.

The results which cover England and Wales are published in this [executive summary](#) and [wider report](#).

About the survey

UNISON surveyed TAs from January to February 2024 and received over 6,000 responses.

The majority (84%) worked in primary or infant schools with the rest employed in special (11%) or secondary schools (5%). Nearly four in five (79%) work full-time – 31 hours or more a week – or nearly full-time (at least 26 hours a week).

Survey findings

The results revealed the extent to which the TA role is being overextended, with schools using TAs to fill teacher shortages.

TAs covering classes for teachers

Contrary to national guidance, TAs are leading classes and 'actively teaching' in place of a regular teacher. Ongoing challenges with teacher and supply staff shortages are a major driver for TAs having to cover classes.

- Almost half of TAs (45%) are covering classes more than they did last year (2022/23)
- Three-quarters (75%) say covering lessons involves actively teaching pupils, yet only half (51%) report being provided with the teacher's lesson plan
- Around two in five working in primary/infant schools (39%) cover classes for at least five hours per week (i.e. one day), while 15 per cent cover classes for at least 11 hours per week – the equivalent of at least two days. Three in five TAs (61%) cover classes for up to four hours per week.
- Half of TAs in secondary and special schools (51 per cent per setting) report covering classes because the school does not have enough teachers
- A quarter of TAs in primary and infant schools report covering classes because their school does not have enough teachers (24%) and/or is unable to get external supply teachers (26%).

Quotes:

"My role has become increasingly one of cover for absent teachers in my department. Last year about half of my time was spent doing this." Secondary higher level teaching assistant

"I am having to cover an average of 3 to 4.5 days a week on a regular basis. This is partly because of the lack of funds to employ the extra staff needed or a supply teacher." Primary/infant teaching assistant

"I have led reception class every afternoon since November. The head implied another member of staff would be taken on, but they haven't been." Primary/infant teaching assistant

"My school has used agency teachers to fill vacancies. The agency teacher in my class left so I was asked to lead my class until a new teacher can be recruited. I'm teaching my class on a full-term basis for the foreseeable future." Special school teaching assistant

Testimonies from TAs and cover supervisors don't want to impact the quality of learning for pupils and opportunities to gain knowledge.

Impact on children and education

TAs are highly motivated by their work and the difference they make to pupils' lives and learning. But despite their efforts and goodwill, they feel there is a negative impact on pupils' learning.

- Over two-thirds of TAs (68%) say covering classes has a negative impact on the quality of learning in their school

- Four in five say covering classes (81%) has a negative impact on SEND/ALN (special education needs and disabilities or additional learning needs) provision in their school. A third (33%) say it has a large negative impact
- Most report that covering classes gets in the way of carrying out their regular duties, with pupils missing out on classroom support (63%), intervention sessions (58%), and those with an education, health and care plan or individual plan (EHCP/IP) missing out on one-to-one support (52%).

Quotes:

“I feel children are missing out. I can’t split myself and help as many as I would when it’s me and a teacher in the room.” Primary/infant teaching assistant

“[Short notice cover] is stressful because my duties are then neglected or a child who has no one-to-one support.” Primary/infant teaching assistant

“The pupils are missing out on the teaching they deserve. The pupils suffer by not having access to qualified teachers. Their parents are completely unaware of the situation.” Secondary teaching assistant

“I don’t think parents have any idea how much of their children’s education is being delivered by unqualified teaching assistants.”

Primary/infant higher level teaching assistant

Impact on workforce/ who covers for TAs?

The findings show that covering lessons has a negative impact on TAs. But they rise to the challenge, despite it being a source of personal stress and anxiety, and additional workload. Many TAs feel that covering classes contributes to feeling undervalued and taken advantage of.

- Just one in four TAs (24%) are paid an uplift for covering classes; 76% of TAs are not
- The uplifts some receive to cover classes range from as little as 20 pence to £3 per hour
- Three-quarters (74%) do not have their role/duties covered when they cover classes. TAs are trying, and struggling, to provide cover in addition to their regular duties
- Around half in primary/infant schools (49%) cover classes alone and two-thirds of secondary TAs (67%) rarely or never have extra TA support in the classes they cover
- Three-quarters (75%) report that being deployed to cover classes has a negative impact on their workload
- Almost half of all TAs (49%) report they are not given time to plan or prepare for lessons that they are deployed to cover. Nearly two in five (39%) report they plan and prepare in their own time
- Four in five say covering classes has a negative impact on their workload (85%) and their health and wellbeing (82%). Covering short notice absences is a particular cause of stress and anxiety

- Two thirds (66%) report that being deployed to cover classes has a negative impact on their sense of effectiveness and their job satisfaction (58%).

Quotes:

“I’m having to cover an average of 3 to 4.5 days a week on a regular basis. This has had a massive negative effect on my health and work-life balance and I’m not sure how much longer I can keep it up.” Primary/infant teaching assistant

“I’m not a teacher, nor had the training but am expected to have the same amount of responsibility and deliver a lesson as one would. This is having a negative effect on my mental and physical health.” Special school teaching assistant

“I’ve already cut my hours down to part-time. This is due to anxiety caused by not knowing whether we have a teacher in class when going into work. I’m now thinking of leaving the job.” Special school teaching assistant

“I only get 20p per hour more than my basic teaching assistant pay for covering lessons. I receive a total of 74p extra for covering a whole afternoon. The additional payment for this morning is approximately £2.50 net. Supply staff would have been paid £150 for the same work.” Primary/infant teaching assistant

Conclusion

While it’s right that teachers receive support from TAs in the classroom it’s astonishing that TAs are frequently expected to lead whole classes without any assistance. The additional responsibilities some TAs are taking provide fresh evidence that their professional status, pay and conditions need reviewing.

With a general election due before the end of the year, teacher shortage and supply are likely to be the number one school workforce issue facing the next government.

However, a workload, recruitment and retention crisis related to TAs is also brewing. Policymakers should not treat this as a separate and less urgent problem.

Indeed, it is connected to the crisis facing teachers. Efforts to resolve both must include a comprehensive and coordinated programme to support and reward the TA workforce.

UNISON is also calling for a review of the role of teaching assistants as they're now providing cover in circumstances way beyond what has been nationally agreed. Their skills must also be better recognised and their pay negotiated by a new, independent body.