



UNSUNG HEROES

The role of teaching assistants and classroom assistants in keeping schools functioning during lockdown

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UNISON commissioned the survey which informs this report. The survey was carried out between 20th January and 5th February 2021 at a point when schools in all for four nations of the UK were under lockdown, and only open to vulnerable and key worker children.

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Executive Summary

This research report details findings from a survey of 9055 teaching assistants and classrooms assistants (hereon TA/CAs) working in primary, secondary and special schools, and early years and pupil referral unit settings in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The survey was conducted during the Winter 2021 lockdown period in the UK. The majority of respondents answering (70%) were working in primary or early years settings, 12% were in secondary and 13% in special schools. The key findings are:

1. TA/CAs have been pivotal in allowing schools to keep functioning during the pandemic. It is hard to see how schools could have managed without them. During the Winter 2021 lockdown, almost half of TA/CAs (49%) covered staff absences, enabling schools to stay open to vulnerable and key worker children. The majority of TA/CAs (88%) supported vulnerable and key worker children in school. Just over half (51%) managed a whole class or bubble on their own. Just over a quarter (26%) led larger classes.

2. TA/CAs have played a vital role in supporting pupil learning in schools during successive lockdowns. In many ways they are the unsung heroes of the pandemic. In addition to leading classes, TA/CAs continued to offer more targeted support. Half of TA/CAs provided differentiated support to individuals working on tasks set; around a third delivered targeted interventions (34%), a third were running one-to-one and small group support sessions (34%); and a third were involved in bespoke support to pupils with a support plan (e.g. Education, Health and Care Plan in England; Co-ordinated Support Plan in Scotland; Statement of SEN in Northern Ireland; or Individual Development Plan in Wales) (32%). Around one in four TA/CAs (39%) reported that, since the pandemic began, they have had fewer opportunities to work with the pupils they were most concerned about.

3. TA/CAs on the frontline felt vulnerable as they worked in school during the lockdown. The risks of exposure to COVID played on their minds. The majority of TA/CAs reported that, as well as supporting learning, they had been responsible for minimising transmission risks by cleaning equipment and school furniture (84%), and reminding pupils to maintain social distancing (83%). Instances where TA/CAs were expected to take prime responsibility for working with children on site during the lockdown led to sharp criticism, with some observing that the '*lowest paid TAs are in school doing the dangerous face-to-face work*'. TA/CAs working in the early years and special schools expressed particular concerns about close contact with children without personal protective equipment. As one TA put it: '*We have put our lives at risk more than any school staff during the pandemic*'.

4. TA/CAs have played an important role in enabling children to carry on learning purposefully at home. Though largely unnoticed, TA/CAs undertook a range of additional tasks, such as preparing hard copy learning packs (39%); liaising with families (36%); participating in live streamed lessons (34%); checking pupils had completed work set remotely (31%); and offering support to pupils having difficulties with home learning (27%). Almost half of TA/CAs (49%) reported that home schooling had worked well for at least some of the pupils they support. While TA/CAs have risen to the challenges of supporting pupils during a pandemic, their training was variable: 44% reported gaining new digital skills, and 20% had training to support pupils' mental health and wellbeing. However, nearly one in four TA/CAs (38%) had been asked to do new things without training.

5. Helping pupils readjust to school is at the forefront of TA/CAs' minds as schools begin to re-open fully. Many TA/CAs (46%) thought that the biggest impacts of the disruption would fall on the pupils they typically support. TA/CAs thought that addressing pastoral care, pupil wellbeing and rebuilding school routines would be very important following lockdown. They considered that providing a safe and secure environment matters in rebuilding pupils' capacity to learn.

6. The COVID crisis has underlined the value of the contribution TA/CAs make to their schools. Their insights and knowledge should be drawn on in the effort to rebuild education. These have been difficult times for schools. Nearly nine in ten TA/CAs (89%) agreed that "people have underestimated the difficulties the pandemic created for schools". Yet, despite the central contribution TA/CAs have made to keeping schools open and functioning, barely a quarter (27%) considered that their own school had become more aware of their role in supporting pupils and families. Our research reveals how essential TA/CAs are to the day-to-day running of schools. This is true in more normal times as well as during a pandemic. If we are to build a more resilient education system going forward, then their voices need to be heard. The unique understanding and clear view of what matters most within their communities, which they have gained from working on the frontline, should be respected and recognised.

Introduction

This report is based on a survey of 9055 teaching assistants and classroom assistants working in primary, secondary and special schools, and early years and pupil referral unit settings in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.¹ The survey was conducted by UCL Institute of Education between 20th January and 5th February 2021, while schools were under lockdown in all parts of the UK, with access only for vulnerable children or children of key and critical workers. In this report we use the term teaching assistant and classroom assistant (TA/CAs) to refer to all support staff in pupil and classroom support roles.

The survey formed part of the UNISON-funded project, “The Role of Teaching and Classroom Assistants during the COVID-19 Crisis”.² The project was based at the International Literacy Centre (ILC), UCL Institute of Education and led by Professor Gemma Moss with researchers Alice Bradbury, Sinéad Harmeay and Rob Webster (UCL Centre for Inclusive Education). Responsibilities for education are devolved to each of the four countries that make up the United Kingdom and this means TA/CAs operate in separate education systems each of which has its own character and nomenclature. Despite these differences the roles have much in common. This report focuses on the role of TA/CAs in supporting their schools, staff, pupils and local communities under the unusual circumstances that COVID-19 has created in education. The report complements previous research that the same ILC team has carried out on English primary schools’ response to COVID.³ It is designed to contribute to public debate on what should happen next to rebuild pupils’ capacity to learn and enhance schools’ capacity to support their communities as recovery funds are made available.

The survey asked TAs/CAs to identify the range of tasks they were undertaking to help keep schools functioning, at a time when many were supporting pupils in school and at home, during the Winter 2021 lockdown. For schools and their staff, this has meant juggling face-to-face teaching of those pupils in school with supporting pupils learning at home, whether online or by providing hard copy resources; while also ensuring the school environment is COVID-secure; and pupils are safe at home.

¹ Breakdowns by demographic characteristics can be found in the Appendix

² <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/international-literacy-centre/role-teaching-classroom-assistants-during-covid-crisis>

³ Moss, G., Allen, R., Bradbury, A., Duncan, S., Harmeay, S., & Levy, R. (2020). *Primary teachers’ experience of the COVID-19 lockdown – Eight key messages for policymakers going forward*. London: UCL Institute of Education https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10103669/1/Moss_DCDT%20Report%201%20Final.pdf

The survey questions were designed to explore how TA/CAs managed these different dimensions to their role, and the support they received in carrying them out, given the additional difficulties for many of balancing their responsibilities at work with their responsibilities to their own families at home.

This was a convenience sample: 93% of respondents were UNISON members replying to the call to complete the survey. We do not have information on how responses were distributed within schools. Responses were analysed by education phase and by information TA/CAs gave on the number of pupils from socially-disadvantaged homes on roll in their school. The majority of respondents were from the primary and early years sector (70%, n = 6325). This influences the analysis. However, the distribution of the sample across primary, early years, secondary and special schools is largely representative of the deployment of TA/CAs in state-funded schools, as recorded in current workforce data (Department for Education, 2021; Scottish Government, 2021; Welsh Government, 2021).⁴ These are respectively: **England**: 66% nursery/primary; 17% secondary; 15% special. **Scotland**: 63% primary; 22% secondary; 15% special. **Wales**: 65% nursery/primary; 3% middle; 19% secondary; 12% special.

The survey included a number of opportunities for TA/CAs to provide open-ended responses, which allowed them to expand on their answers to the closed-ended questions, provide additional detail, and share their views and experiences. This gave respondents opportunities to describe otherwise unrecorded aspects of the work they did to help families and support vulnerable learners, including those with special educational needs (SEN) in Northern Ireland, SEN and disabilities (SEND) in England, additional support needs (ASN) in Scotland, or additional learning needs (ALN) in Wales, over and above supporting teaching and learning in school and remotely. At the close of the survey we gave respondents a final open-ended space in which to reflect on what matters most, as schools begin to plan ahead for teaching after lockdown, as the hold of the pandemic on education recedes and the majority of children return to school. The most responses to an open question were for Question 2, where 17% (n = 1574) of respondents provided additional information. We present responses from these open-ended data to illustrate the numerical survey findings and add colour and depth to the analysis.

⁴ Sources: Department for Education (2021) *School Workforce in England: November 2019*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england>; Scottish Government (2021) *School Support Staff 2019*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-support-staff-statistics/>; Welsh Government (2021) *Support Staff by School and Category, 2020*. <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/teachers-and-support-staff/School-Staff/supportstaff-by-school-category>

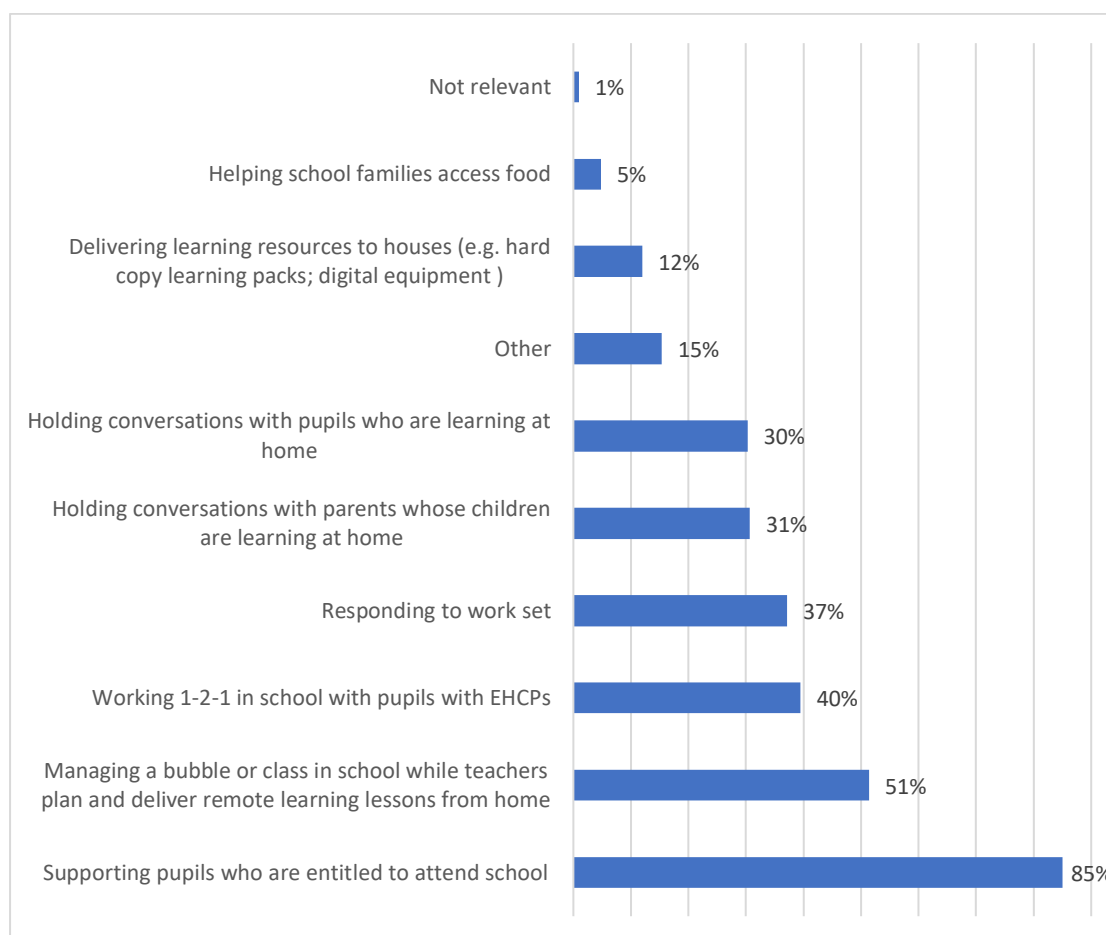
Finally, at points in the report we highlight the views from TA/CAs in special schools and early years settings. Our survey received fewer responses from TA/CAs in these phases compared with mainstream primary and secondary schools, but it was clear from the small number of open-ended comments we received that TA/CAs in these settings had a different experience of the pandemic.

Key findings

1. Teaching assistants and classroom assistants have been crucial in allowing schools to function during lockdown

During the early months of 2021, schools in each of the four nations of the UK found themselves in lockdown once again and providing education to children on site and at home. TAs/CAs were a vital resource for schools dealing with these challenging circumstances and found themselves deployed in many different ways. The majority of TA/CAs were directly involved in supporting those children entitled to be in school (85%, n = 7700).

Figure 1: Percentage of TA/CAs involved with different types of learning and support activities during lockdown



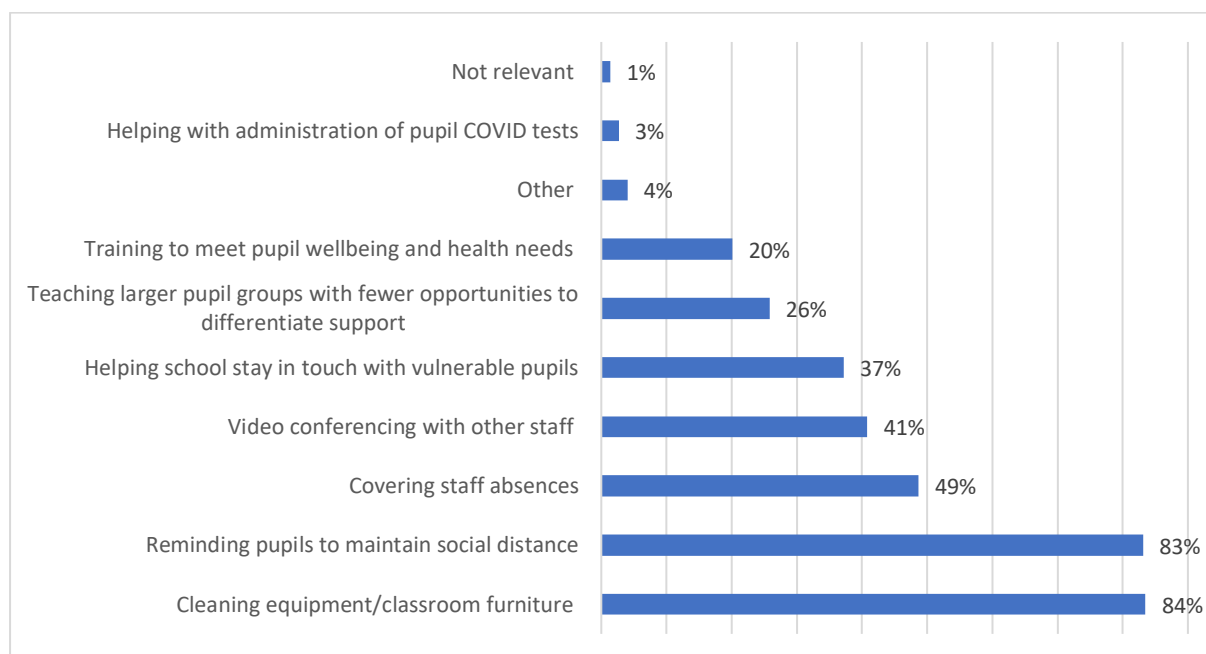
Question 2: In your support role, which of the following have you personally been involved with this last week?

Just over half of our respondents (51%, n = 4656) were managing a bubble group or class in school while the class teachers were planning and delivering remote content off site. (We comment on this pattern of deployment in Section 4). 40% (n = 3575) were working one-to-one with pupils with SEN/SEND/ASN/ALN who had a support plan (e.g. Education, Health and Care Plan [EHCP] in England; Co-ordinated Support Plan [CSP] in Scotland; Statement of SEN [SSEN] in Northern Ireland; or Individual Development Plan [IDP] in Wales); and roughly a third were supporting learning at home by holding conversations with parents (31%, n = 2777) and/or children (30%, n = 2743).

Comparatively small numbers of TA/CAs were involved in helping families access food (5%, n = 434); or delivering learning resources to the doorstep (12%, n = 1084). These activities were more commonly undertaken by TA/CAs working in low socio-economic status (SES) schools. Of the 1084 TA/CAs delivering learning resources to homes, 60% (n = 645) worked in low SES schools.

To help schools stay open and COVID-secure, TA/CAs working in school cleaned equipment and classroom furniture (84%, n = 7563); and reminded pupils to maintain social distancing (83%, n = 7525). Just under half covered for staff absence (49%, n = 4411); while 26% (n = 2334) said they led larger pupil groups with fewer opportunities to differentiate support.

Figure 2: Percentage of TA/CAs involved with different types of tasks designed to help schools function during COVID



Question 4: To help schools function during the pandemic, which of the following have you been doing?

Changed circumstances led to new activities: 41% (n = 3691) of our respondents were video-conferencing with other staff to stay in touch and for mutual support; while 20% (n = 1820) had undertaken training to support pupil mental health and wellbeing.

The picture that emerges is one of TA/CAs acting like the mortar in the brickwork of schools, enabling schools to respond to the range of challenges specific to their setting. Schools have had to react nimbly to changing conditions over the course of the pandemic. Most recently in the Winter 2021 lockdown this has included transitioning successfully to provide remote learning at scale, while also remaining open to on-site learning. TA deployment has been essential in allowing schools to adapt to these novel and challenging circumstances. Indeed, the deployment of TA/CAs to fill in for noticeable gaps seems to have been particularly crucial in primary schools. In comparison to secondary schools, they operate with smaller total staff numbers, with TA/CAs making up a higher proportion of the workforce. Certainly, of those who reported managing groups or classes on their own without a teacher (51%, n = 4656), nearly three quarters were working in primary schools (72%, n = 3346). Likewise, of those covering staff absences, 69% (n = 3046) were working in the primary sector. (See also Section 4.)

The view from special schools: Operating at ‘full capacity’

In England, the government guidance on access to schools for pupils with SEND meant that specialist settings could have been expected to continue providing places for all of their pupils throughout periods of lockdown. Most special schools and colleges in England (89%) were able to continue offering some school places; however, the majority had to reduce their capacity, meaning on average they could only provide around a third of their usual number of places.⁵ As a consequence, special schools have been operating at a higher capacity than mainstream schools for much of the pandemic, often with fewer staff.

[Special] schools have not been closed and operating at a scarily ridiculous capacity nationwide.

School life has remained the same for almost all of the pupils and their families.

I work in a specialist primary school which has been 'at FULL capacity' pretty much throughout the pandemic

Staffing is short because COVID has raged through school.

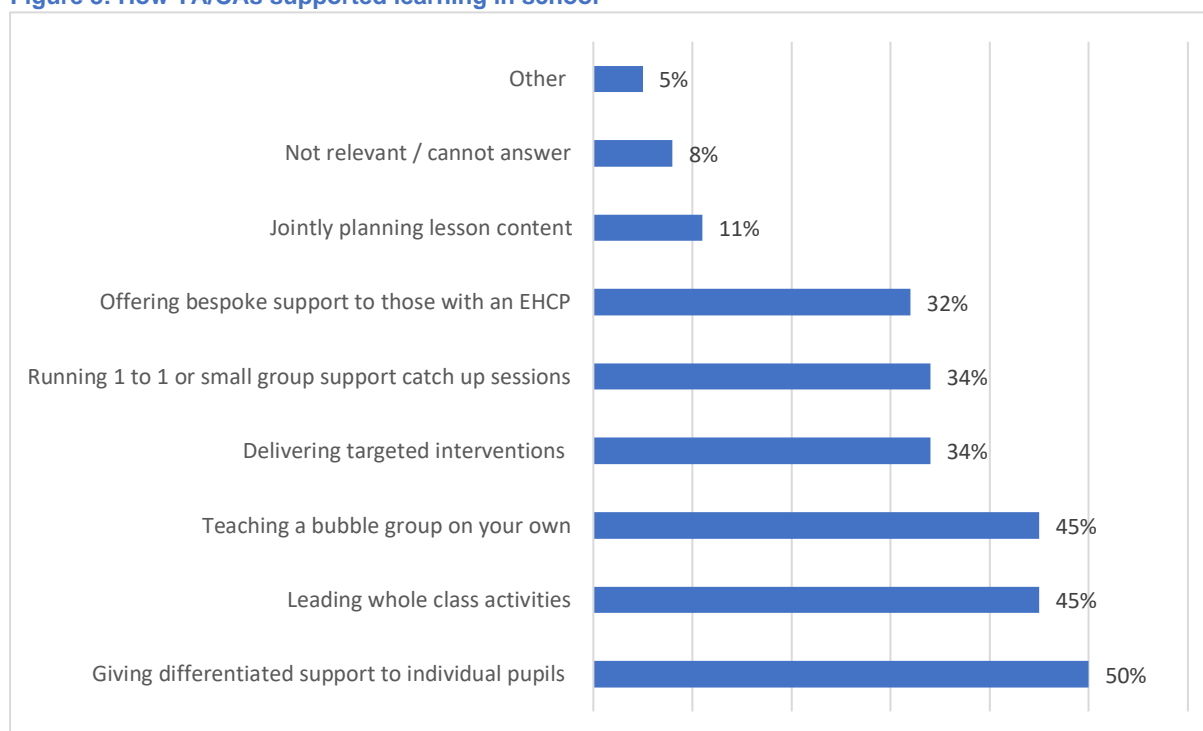
⁵ Skipp, A., Hopwood, V. & Webster, R, with Julius, J. & McLean, D. (2021) *Special education during lockdown: Providers' and parents' experiences. Research summary.* [https://mk0nuffieldfounpg9ee.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Special Education Lockdown_ASKResearch.pdf](https://mk0nuffieldfounpg9ee.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Special_Education_Lockdown_ASKResearch.pdf)

2. TA/CAs have played a vital role in supporting pupil learning in school

Throughout the pandemic, schools have never fully closed. They have always remained open to children of key workers and vulnerable children. Over time, the proportions of children in and out of school have shifted; and the investment in supporting children learning remotely at home has increased. Juggling this combination of responsibilities – for those learning at home and those learning in school – has been difficult for staff. It has also altered the ways in which TA/CAs are deployed.

In reflecting on how they were supporting pupil learning in school, half of our respondents told us that they were still giving differentiated support to individual pupils working on particular tasks (50%, n = 4499). Roughly a third were continuing to offer bespoke support to children with a support plan (e.g. EHCP/CSP/SSEN/IDP) (32%, n = 2906); roughly a third were running one-to-one or small group catch-up sessions (34%, n = 3038); roughly a third were delivering targeted interventions (34%, n = 3070). In the open-ended comments, a number of TA/CAs who worked predominantly with pupils with SEN/SEND/ASN/ALN also reported working with pupils without needs, or with different or additional pupils to those they usually supported. In some instances, this was reported as happening when the child for whom a TA was a one-to-one was not in school (because, for instance, they were shielding).

Figure 3: How TA/CAs supported learning in school

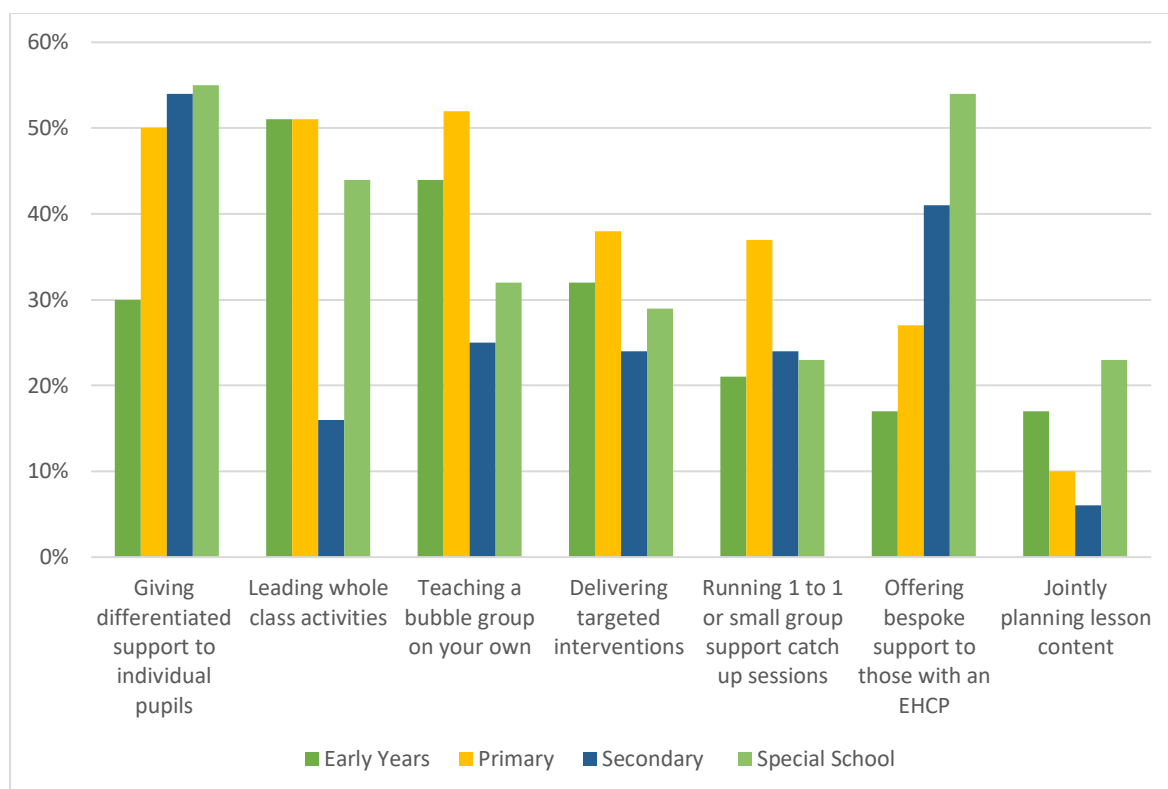


Question 5. To support pupils who are learning in school during the pandemic, which of the following have you been involved in?

Alongside maintaining differentiated support for small groups and individuals, a higher number of TA/CAs than one would expect under normal conditions reported leading whole class activities (45%, n = 4044), or managing a bubble group alone (45%, n = 4025).

Breaking down the responses by phase, a smaller proportion of the TA/CAs in the secondary sector were leading whole class activities than in primary, early years or even special schools.

Figure 4: Proportion of TA/CAs running different learning activities in school, by sector



Question 5. To support pupils who are learning in school during the pandemic, which of the following have you been involved in?

A larger proportion of TA/CAs in secondary and special schools were continuing to offer bespoke support to those with a support plan (e.g. EHCP/CSP/SSEN/IDP). We think these differences in deployment may represent differences in what each sector found it possible to ask staff to do in terms of managing whole groups; and how decisions about whole class roles then impacted on the provision of differentiated support for learners.

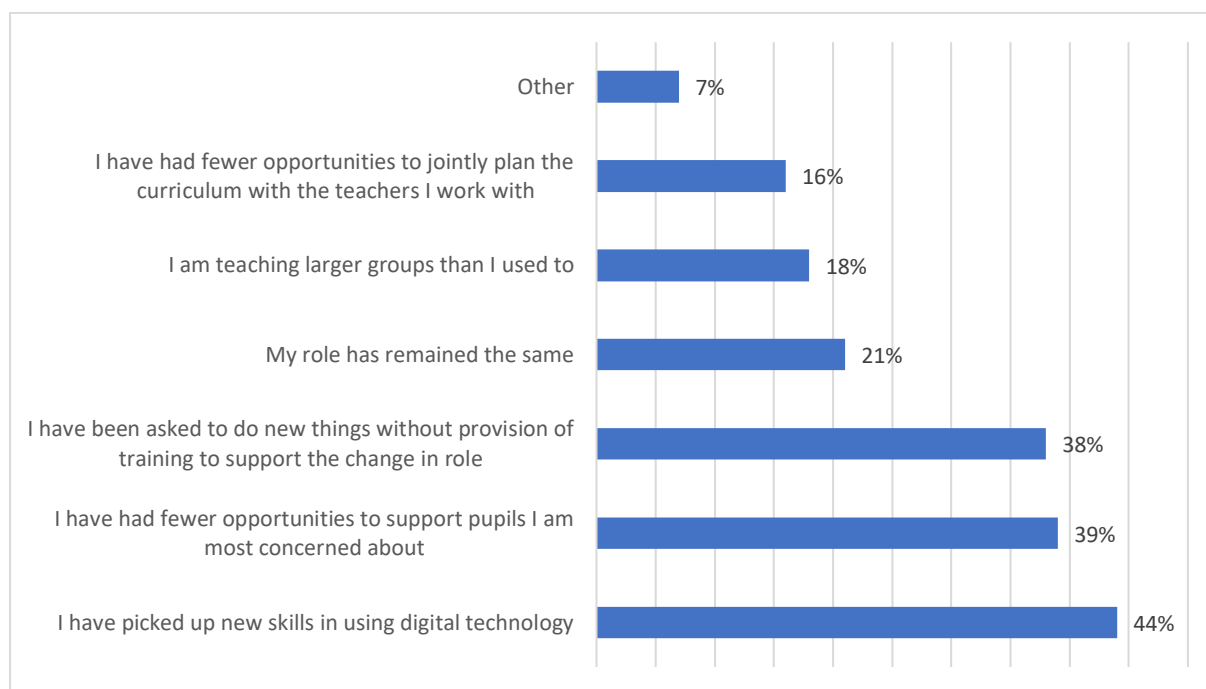
Looking across the combination of activities undertaken, the data suggest that TA/CAs were expanding their role to take on new responsibilities for larger groups *as well as* sustaining

support for individuals and smaller groups. In the open-ended responses, primary TA/CAs also indicated that some had been deployed to lead classes or bubbles, or offer support in classes in different year groups to those they typically worked with. Taken together, this might well imply increased pressure on TA staff, in the midst of all the other difficulties the pandemic had created.

3. Some TA/CAs have had fewer opportunities to support the children they are most concerned about

We asked TA/CAs to reflect on changes to their support role in the unusual conditions the pandemic had created. Many agreed that their current deployment gave them fewer opportunities to work with the children they were most concerned about (39%, n = 3506). Certainly, the need to keep schools opening and functioning for the maximum numbers possible, and the decision to deploy TA/CAs in more whole class management roles as a consequence, may mean that those children identified as being in need of TA support may have been net losers. Reinstating working arrangements within school that strengthen the support TA/CAs can offer individuals or small groups may indeed be a priority following the wider reopening of schools.

Figure 5: Changes to the TA support role



Question 3: Since March last year when the pandemic began, how has your role in supporting pupils changed?

Set against that change in patterns of deployment, roughly one fifth (21%, n = 1927) of our respondents reported that their role had remained the same. Comments amongst the open-ended responses to Q3 indicated that a number of TA/CAs had either changed role at the start of the current school year (i.e. between lockdowns) or had started their job in or after September 2021. This meant that they did not have a point of comparison. This may also partly explain the relatively large proportion of the sample reporting no change to their role.

As a positive gain from new ways of working, many TA/CAs reported that they had picked up new digital skills (44%, n = 4011). We do not know the extent to which this happened with planned training or whether TA/CAs acquired new skills on the job, through their involvement in supporting remote learning (See Section 5). Certainly, 38% (n = 3468) of those responding to this question also reported that they had been asked to do new things without training. It may be that TA/CAs were simply responding to school needs as and when; and indeed that schools themselves were faced with filling gaps at speed without always having the capacity to plan and provide training on a timely basis.

4. TA/CAs felt vulnerable as they worked on in schools

As we saw in Section 1, during the Winter 2021 lockdown, just over half (51%, n = 4656) of respondents reported they were managing a bubble or class in school while teachers planned remote learning and delivered lessons from home. In England in particular, this pattern of staff deployment seems to have been a direct result of the Temporary Continuity Direction for the Provision of Remote Education the English government issued in October 2020. This placed on schools a duty to provide “immediate access to remote education”⁶ for those pupils at home, with some confusion over what was meant by remote⁷, and whether it implied exclusively online and digital. Either way, obligations to provide remote education intensified as English schools entered the Winter 2021 lockdown. Yet paradoxically, this happened at precisely the same time as the extension of rights to attend school to children whose parents counted as critical as well as key workers. The category ‘vulnerable’ was also extended to all children without access to a laptop. The net result was that considerably higher numbers of children were on the school premises and in classrooms than in any of the

⁶

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/923539/Remote_Education_Temporary_Continuity_Direction_-_Explanatory_Note.pdf

⁷ https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/remote_education_definition_unde

previous lockdowns, at exactly the point when more emphasis was being placed on supporting learning at home.⁸

Our open-ended responses support the view that having larger than expected groups in schools in England stemmed from the blurring of the government guidance over who qualified as ‘vulnerable’ and ‘keyworker’ children, and could therefore attend school during the Winter 2021 lockdown. TAs in England reported that the confusion led to more parents returning their children to school. Larger and less safe class sizes than anticipated followed. For some TA/CAs, managing larger classes was a source of anxiety, and fed a sense that schools – and perhaps TA/CAs specifically – were being taken advantage of.

The government need to be clear on keyworkers and ensure guidance shows parents who can should keep children at home. We have full-time mums and retired dads sending children in... This has caused huge anger with parents keeping their children at home and doing the right thing, and has put schools in an impossible situation.

Despite this current lockdown, the class I currently work in has an average of 17 students. The keyworker list was too big for us to maintain safety.

Parents were asked to keep their children at home but they chose not to. I felt very anxious.

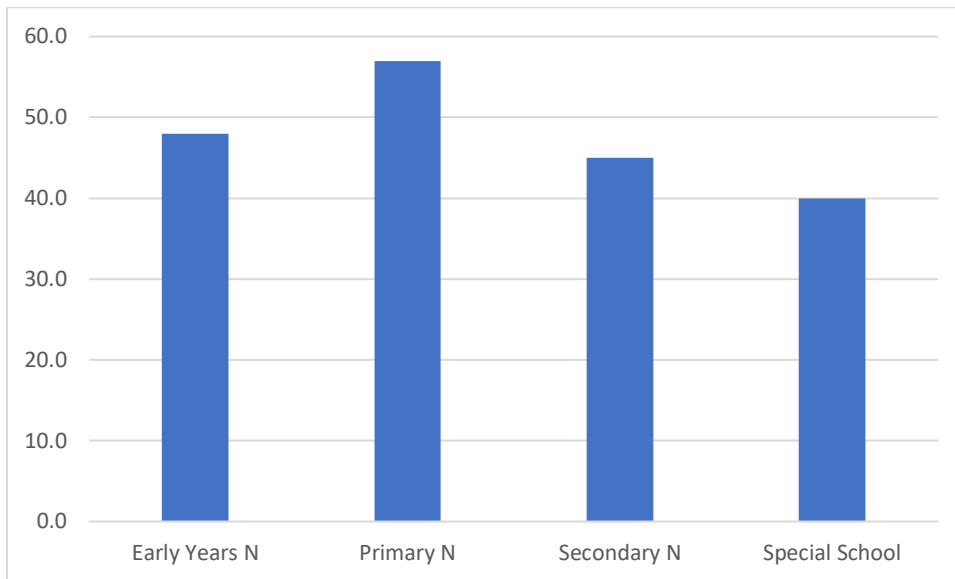
It would be nice if we were appreciated for our hard work rather than simply being seen by some as a free childcare service.

The English context may go some way to explaining why such a large proportion of TA/CAs reported being deployed to manage classes and bubbles of pupils in school, while teachers planned remote learning provision at home. However, 39% (n=209) of CA respondents in Scotland reported the same pattern of deployment, as did 41% (n=200) of those in Wales.

Whatever the reasons behind this decision, the pattern of deploying TA/CAs to manage pupils in school while teachers planned remote learning at home appears to have been most common in the primary sector. We found that 72% (n = 3346) of the TA/CAs who reported working in this way were working in primary schools. Of course, this reflects the higher numbers of primary TA/CAs in our sample. However, comparing the proportions of respondents reporting this pattern by phase and sector, this pattern of deployment is still more common in primary schools.

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/whats-working-well-in-remote-education>

Figure 6: Managing a bubble or class in school while teachers plan and deliver remote learning lessons from home



Question 2: In your support role, which of the following have you personally been involved in?

The fact that TA/CAs were more likely than teachers to be on site during the Winter 2021 lockdown, and managing bigger groups on their own, provoked a very strong set of open-ended responses from TA/CAs at the end of our survey. Respondents described themselves as working ‘on the frontline’, and shouldering much of the responsibility for keeping schools open. Open-ended responses drew particular attention to what TA/CAs saw as an ‘unfair’ difference between their role and their working conditions, and the role and working conditions of teachers.

I think it’s so unfair that teachers are teaching remotely, but the TAs are on the frontline with the most vulnerable and keyworker kids.

This sense of uneven treatment also stemmed from what many regarded as having to take greater risks in terms of exposure to COVID. In some cases, this was exacerbated by worries about pupils not consistently following social distancing measures and mask-wearing in school.

Unfair to leave TAs in charge of classes which are around 20 in number whilst teachers are safe at home.

In my school, teachers ALL stay at home ALL of the time while the lowest paid TAs are in school doing the dangerous face-to-face work with keyworker and vulnerable children.

A clear and consistent theme in the open-ended responses was that while TA/CAs have unquestionably stepped up to the challenges presented by the pandemic, the effects of this for them have been far from benign. The broadening and/or changing of roles and responsibilities was a clear source of anxiety and stress. Some TA/CAs gave the impression of feeling overwhelmed with an unfamiliar and intense new workload, while others pointed to the risks to their health and the impact of family life.

We have put our lives at risk more than any school staff during the pandemic.

At our school, TAs are in five days a week whilst teachers are only in for two. TAs are planning, teaching, supporting pupil wellbeing, reporting back to parents, dealing with all classroom stresses without support of the teachers.

Not fair on staff with own children that have to go in as keyworker children 5 days a week.

Many of those responding expressed feelings of being 'let down' during the pandemic, and identified failings at both school leadership and government levels.

Headteacher needs to be in schools during crisis, not putting PSA [Pupil Support Assistant] staff in with hardly any management.

Support staff in school are undervalued... The Headteacher, in a school-wide 'Zoom' staff briefing, said that 'the teaching staff were staying safe and teaching from home, whilst the support staff looked after the students in school'.

My head has been wonderful but I feel completely let down and disregarded by government.

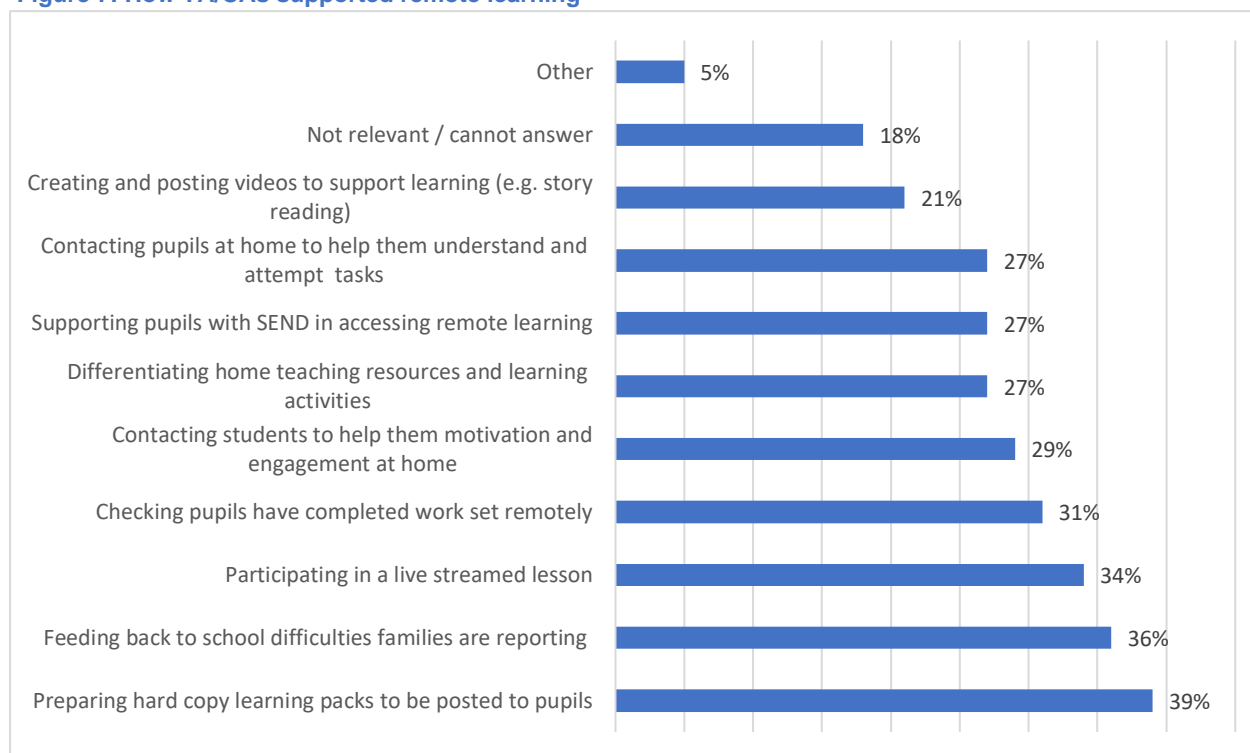
Throughout the pandemic schools have had to react fast as directives and guidance from the authorities running education in each of the four nations have changed. Our study shows some of the unintended consequences that resulted from doing so at speed.

5. TA/CAs have risen to the challenge of supporting remote learning

Our survey data highlight some of the difficult decisions schools had to make to keep learning happening for those pupils on site, while also supporting those learning at home. TA/CAs have unquestionably played a central part in enabling schools to stay open and functioning. At the same time, they were also supporting remote learning. The tasks involved in doing so were diverse, ranging from: preparing hard copy learning packs (39%, n = 3484);

liaising between schools and families over tasks set and how families were coping (36%, n = 3232); participating in live streamed lessons (34%, n = 3090); checking pupils had completed work set remotely, including marking and providing feedback (31%, n = 2765); contacting pupils to help them stay motivated and engaged (29%, n = 2589); offering support to individual pupils if they had difficulty in attempting home learning tasks set (27%, n = 2408); and creating video resources (21%, n = 1855).

Figure 7: How TA/CAs supported remote learning



Question 6: To support remote learning during the pandemic, which of the following have you been involved with?

All of this speaks to the considerable and often unrecognised commitments that TA/CAs have made to enable children to carry on learning purposefully at home, while others are in school. One reason the task list is so diverse is because schools have had to think carefully about how to adapt their approach in order to support home learning effectively. This includes bearing in mind: the varying levels of knowledge and support parents might be able to offer their children; pupils' levels of interest and engagement in completing the work set; as well as the more immediate difficulties some pupils might experience in getting online or understanding the tasks set. These run alongside the more obviously "teacherly" contributions of taking part in live streamed lessons or preparing videos to be used at home.

Such considerations underline the importance of taking local contexts and levels of deprivation into account in understanding what schools have done. Certainly, much other

research confirms the huge difference that variable levels of access to digital devices in low SES communities made to what schools could do and how they could best support learning at home.^{9,10}). TA/CAs' comments relating to online teaching and the transition to remote learning suggested that some schools were faring better than others.

I feel very lucky to be in a school where all the technology and training was set up before we knew about COVID-19, so for us as a school community our transition from school to live lessons has been smoother and easier than many other schools.

6. TA/CAs' priorities on wider reopening are pupil wellbeing and rebuilding school routines

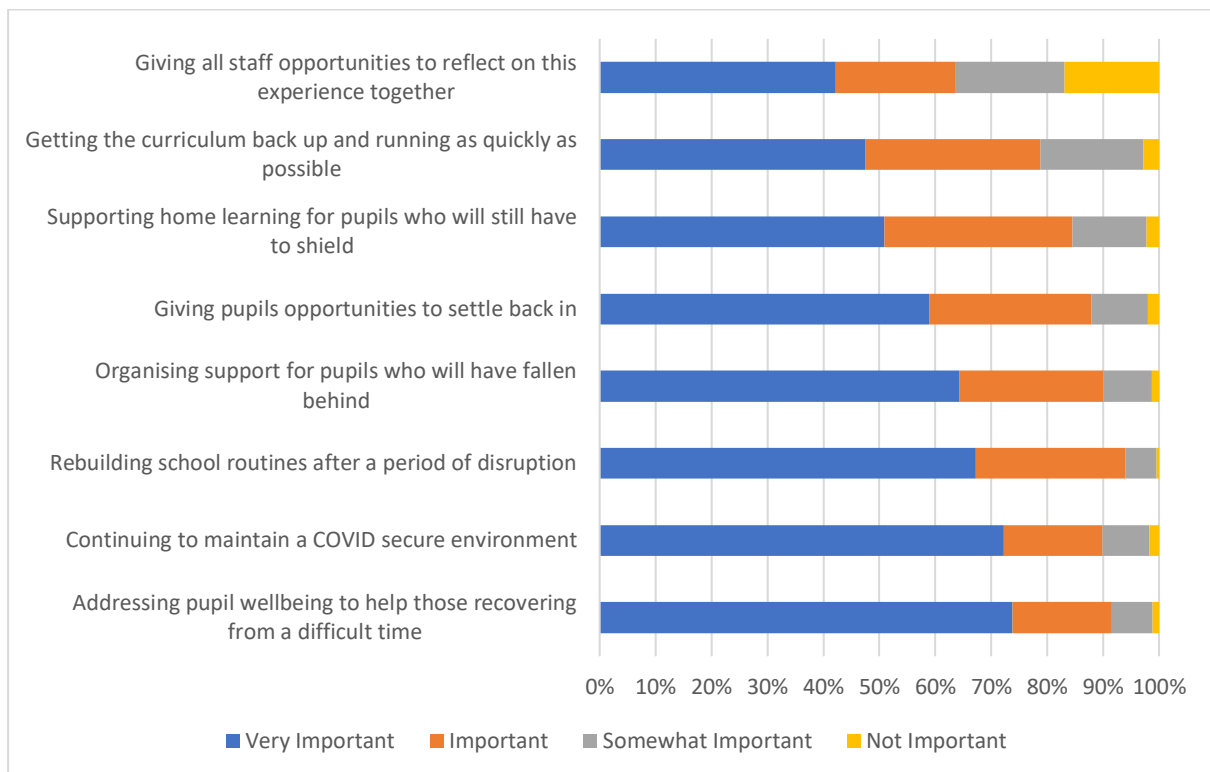
In reflecting on what might matter most in school following lockdown, TA/CAs ranked addressing pupil wellbeing (89%, n = 8070¹¹) and rebuilding school routines (91%, n = 8282) as amongst their highest priorities. Choices reflected a clear sense that providing a safe and secure environment matters in rebuilding pupils' capacity to learn. Support for those who had fallen behind was ranked as the most urgent educational need (88%, n = 7919). Addressing pupils' immediate needs took priority over thinking about curriculum delivery or even giving staff themselves time to reflect (62%, n = 5589).

⁹ Moss, G., Allen, R., Bradbury, A., Duncan, S., Harmey, S., & Levy, R. (2020). *Primary teachers' experience of the COVID-19 lockdown – Eight key messages for policymakers going forward*. London: UCL Institute of Education https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10103669/1/Moss_DCDT%20Report%201%20Final.pdf

¹⁰ Lucas, M., Nelson, J. & Sims, D. (2020). *Schools' responses to COVID-19: Pupil engagement in remote learning*. Slough: NFER.

¹¹ We combine statements ranked as very important and important in the figures in the text

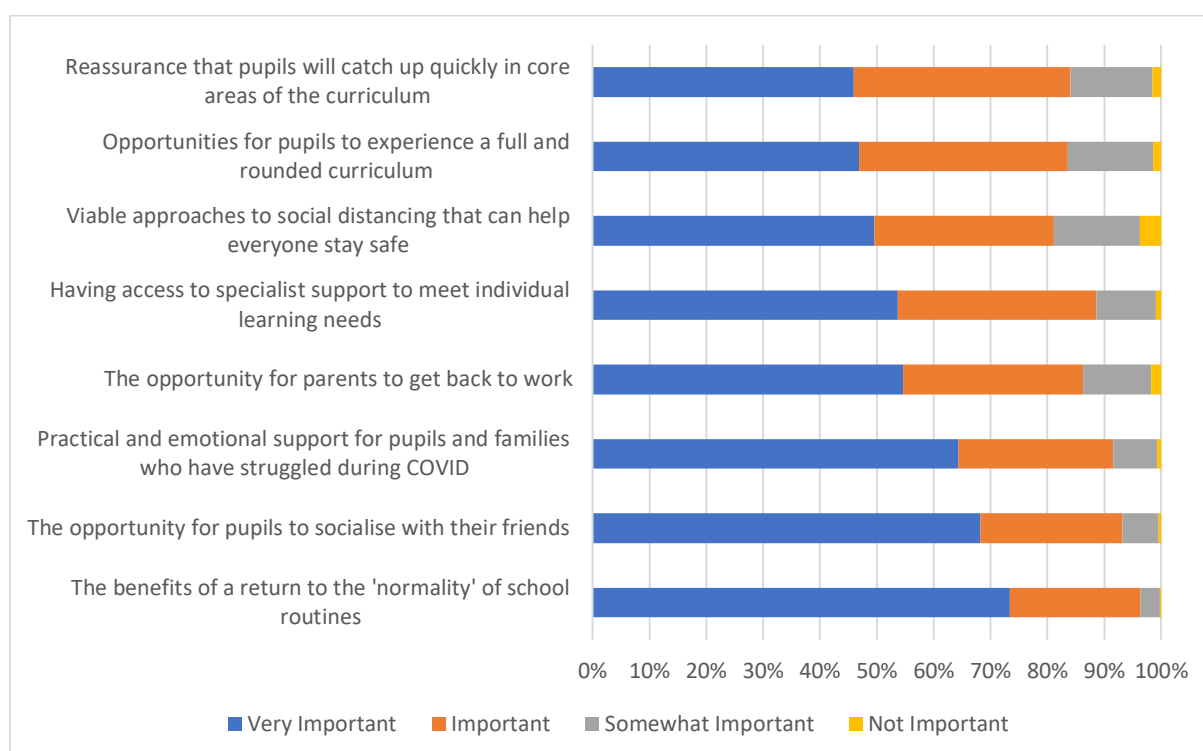
Figure 8: What matters most as lockdown ends



Question 7: When this lockdown ends, which of the following do you think will matter most in YOUR SCHOOL? Please rank the importance of each statement.

TACAs made very similar judgements when thinking about what families would value most. They thought families would value the benefits of returning to normal school routines, the opportunities for children to socialise with each other, and the practical and emotional support schools could offer pupils and their families over other aspects of schooling. TACAs were very aware of how important the wider reopening of schools might be for families needing to get back to work. In terms of more directly educational priorities, TACAs thought that what would matter most to families would be the benefits of accessing specialist support for individual learning needs (86%, n = 7741).

Figure 9: What matters to families as lockdown ends



Question 8: From your interactions with families and pupils over the pandemic, what do you think YOUR families will value the most when schools fully reopen? Rank the importance of each statement.

There were a small number of open-ended comments from TA/CAs on how schools ought to respond to the disruption caused by the partial school closures, once lockdown restrictions were lifted and schools could begin to get 'back to normal'. Comments from two TA/CAs summed up many of the responses on this theme, saying that schools should not be 'racing back to jumping through hoops for exam grades', and that the UK government should prioritise 'the emotional recovery of pupils and staff'.

The mental health of children is essential to enable them to achieve and learn. Less emphasis needs to be placed on high academic achievement and more emphasis on the importance of managing and maintaining good mental health. Children need to be taught skills to self-regulate and recognise changes in their mental health.

The pressure being put on schools and pupils about reassurance to parents they will catch-up needs to be realistic. Some children have large gaps. The expectation that they will be caught up and on target in a short period of time is unrealistic. This is going to have an impact for time to come, and needs to be recognised and acknowledged accordingly.

TA/CAs viewed the overall recovery from the pandemic as a long-term project in which expectations need to be managed.

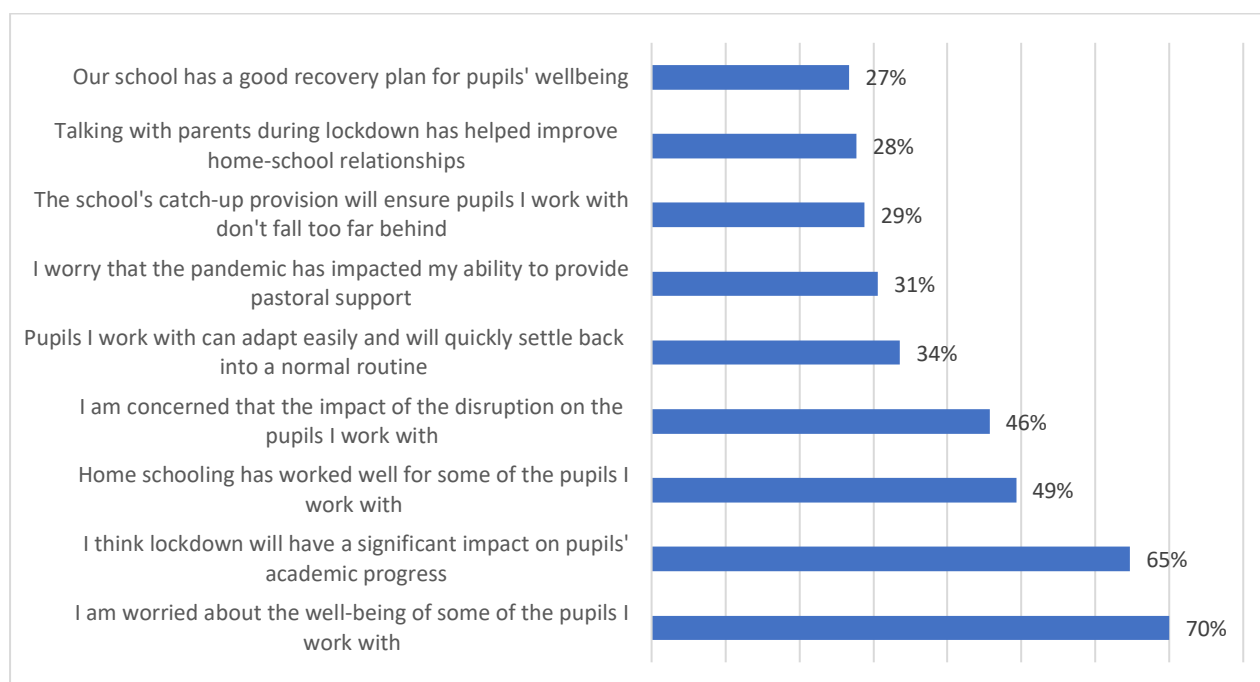
Re-pacing the curriculum to consolidate learning: ‘Year 1 has been terrible’

Commenting on the difficulties of expecting young children to catch up fast, one TA said *“Following lockdown 1 [spring/summer 2020], emphasis was on settling children. Within 4 weeks, we were back having to provide full curriculum! At the start of the new school year, the gaps were huge in learning. One of the most hit groups, in my opinion, were Year 1. You would not try to build without a good foundation, and those children had missed not only first steps to numeracy and literacy, but a massive amount in EYFS. Year 1 has been terrible. Still trying to dance to the beat of the drum and plug massive gaps in knowledge while teaching in COVID compliant spaces has been near impossible. The year has been interrupted with both personal and bubble periods of isolation, staff absences, and now a second lockdown involving schools. It’s really time to seriously think about not forging ahead, making teaching staff plug ever-widening gaps and children not being equipped to face the next steps.”*

TA/CAs had mixed views on the impacts of such an extended period of disruption to schooling on the particular pupils they ordinarily support. Just under half of our respondents (46%, n = 4141) agreed that the biggest impacts of the disruption would have fallen on the pupils they worked with. In line with their thinking about priorities for schools re-opening, TA/CAs were mainly concerned about the wellbeing of their pupils (70%, n = 6334) and impacts on their academic progress (65%, n = 5855). A third were concerned that the pandemic had impacted on their ability to offer pastoral support to these pupils.

Against this, nearly half of those surveyed indicated that home schooling had worked well for at least some of the pupils they ordinarily supported (49%, n = 4468). Just over a quarter (27%, n = 2420) were confident in their school’s plans for supporting pupil wellbeing, and just under a third (29%, n = 2609) thought the arrangements made for catch-up provision would ensure the pupils they worked with would not fall too far behind.

Figure 10: The impacts of the disruption on the pupils TA/CAs support.



Question 10: Thinking about the consequences of the disruption to education COVID has caused for the PUPILS you work with, tick any of these statements that you agree with:

Broken down by sector, 40% (n = 2342) of respondents working in primary schools thought pupils would bounce back quickly once things returned to normal. We found that 50% of TA/CAs working in early years settings agreed (though it is worth noting that most early years settings other than Reception classes stayed open during the Winter 2021 lockdown). By contrast, only 20% (n = 204) of those working in secondary schools (n = 209) and 18% of those working in specialist settings (n = 211) took this view.

These differences in opinion and expectation may be symptomatic of the high levels of uncertainty there are over what the likely long-term impacts on pupils may be of such an unprecedented period of school closures and disruption to learning. At the time of the survey, it was unclear when exactly schools would fully re-open, how and under what conditions.

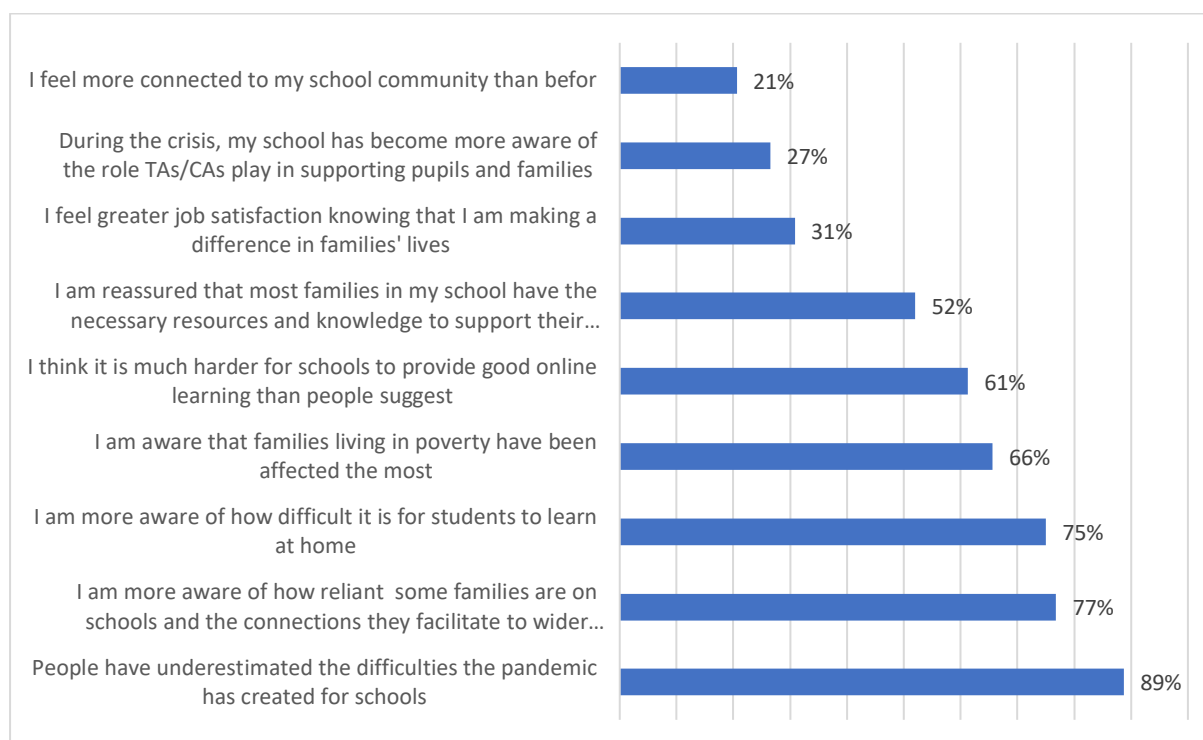
7. Rebuilding a more resilient education system needs everyone to be involved

The survey responses we reported earlier outlined the pivotal contribution TA/CAs have made in keeping schools open and keeping pupils learning. In thinking about their experiences of working through the pandemic, nearly nine in ten respondents agreed that “people have underestimated the difficulties the pandemic has created for schools” (89%, n = 8028), with 61% (n = 5548) agreeing that “it is much harder for schools to provide good online learning than people suggest”. The sense that the public lacked understanding of what it has been like, working on the frontline, surfaced very strongly in the open-ended comments.

It is striking that in reflecting back on their experiences in helping schools function during the crisis, barely a quarter (27%, n = 2786) of our respondents considered that their schools had become more aware of their own role as TA/CAs in supporting families and pupils. Only one in five felt more connected to their school community than before (21%, n = 1836). Of course, this might mean that the respondents who did not choose these statements already felt well recognised in their roles, and in touch with their wider school community. But the open-ended comments suggest otherwise.

Our respondents recognised that the pandemic has had profound effects on the entire school community. In dealing with the multiple dimensions to the disruption, many TA/CAs reported their increased awareness of how reliant some families are, both on schools themselves and on the connections schools can make to wider support services (77%, n = 6952). We found that 66% (n = 5937) of TA/CAs agreed that families living in poverty had been most affected by the pandemic. Many respondents agreed that they had become more aware of how difficult it was for pupils to learn at home (75%, n = 6793).

Figure 11: Schools and communities during COVID



Question 9: Thinking about YOUR experiences of working in school during COVID, tick any of these statements that you agree with.

Yet just over half of our respondents (52%, n = 4710) also thought that most families in their school did have the necessary resources and knowledge to support their children’s learning at home. The impacts of COVID have indeed been difficult to gauge.

The view from special schools: ‘Forgotten about’ by the government and the public

The responses from TAs in special schools in England convey feelings of frustration over being treated differently to mainstream schools, and indeed that they had been ‘forgotten about’ by the government and in the minds of the public.

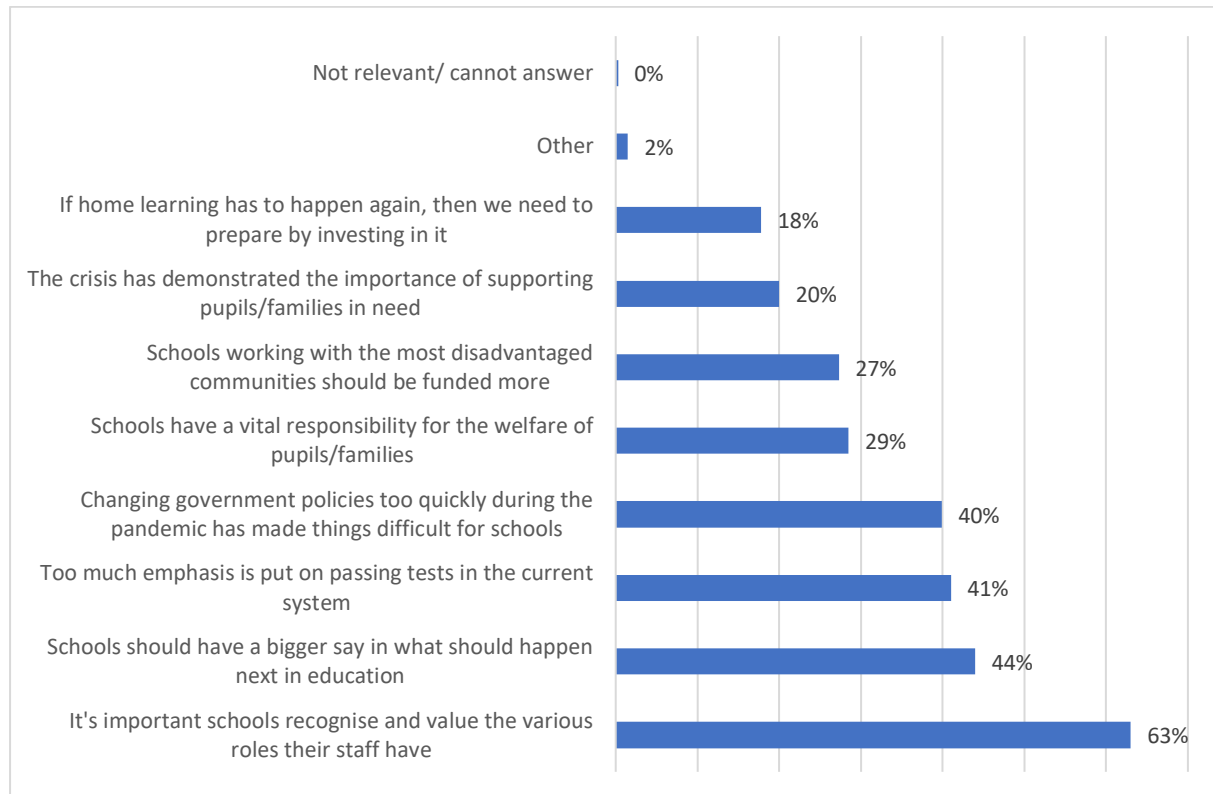
Special schools have been treated differently, putting their staff and communities at a higher risk.

COVID has ripped through the school as government guidelines say we should not be wearing PPE. We have been forgotten about in government guidance and made to put our lives and the lives of our families in danger!!!

Special schools need more recognition in the media as we have never closed. We have had much higher numbers of students through the second wave. We have not had the vaccine as a priority group, considering we do medical interventions such a gastrostomy feeds, medications etc., all non-socially distanced, up-close personal care etc. We look after vulnerable, limited life students, who also have not had their vaccinations.

To set an agenda for “building back better”, in our final survey question we asked TA/CAs to think about some of the broader issues the crisis has raised for how education is run; and what else might need to change. In thinking about what the education system as a whole might learn from the pandemic, TA/CAs ranked most highly (63%, n = 5712) the statement: “It’s important schools recognise and value the various roles their staff have played during the pandemic, and how they together support their communities”.

Figure 10: Reflecting on the longer term changes education needs



Question 11. Thinking about what the education system as a whole might learn from the pandemic going forward, which of the following statements matters most to you? Please tick up to three.

In line with our teacher survey¹², many TA/CAs agreed that “Schools should have a bigger say in what should happen next in education” (44%, n = 4021). A slightly smaller number supported placing less emphasis on testing – a particular issue in English schools. Just under 40% (n = 3614) considered that the rapid changes in government policy during the pandemic had made things more, not less, difficult for schools. There was only modest

¹² Moss, G., Allen, R., Bradbury, A., Duncan, S., Harme, S., & Levy, R. (2020). *Primary teachers’ experience of the COVID-19 lockdown – Eight key messages for policymakers going forward*. London: UCL Institute of Education. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10103669/1/Moss_DCdT%20Report%201%20Final.pdf

support (18%, n = 1614) for investing in training for online teaching to better prepare for home learning if it is needed again in the future.

These priorities perhaps speak to longer standing frustrations with the way things run. In particular, COVID appears to have exacerbated existing feelings that TA/CAs are undervalued, underappreciated and under-recognised. Respondents used the open-ended sections of the survey to voice this wider set of concerns.

I think that in many schools this crisis will have highlighted the differences in the way schools value their staff. Again teaching assistants are being asked to go above and beyond their usual roles and are receiving very little support or recognition in return.

Schools need to recognise the support staff who have worked consistently throughout both lockdowns. LSAs have not been recognised for their work.

I think it has become very apparent that schools could not run as smoothly or even perhaps open if it weren't for support staff.

Some TA/CAs certainly hoped that appreciation of their role might be reflected in higher pay, and made the case on the basis of what they had done during the pandemic:

TAs who have led bubbles/groups on a full-time basis, for weeks/months should receive a higher pay grade for the duration of that time, in recognition that their role has changed to one of teaching, as the sole adult in the classroom, and therefore taking on much of the responsibility and status, in all but salary, of teacher colleagues.

School leaders need to recognise the difficulty and strain supporting learning in schools during the lockdown that TAs have been under. Repeatedly we are being asked to put other people's children ahead of our own of significant risk to our health.

These kinds of comments reveal most clearly a sense of the insufficiency of investment in those aspects of education that matter most, in schools and in communities. In particular they draw attention to how little consideration is given to the value of the staff that schools already employ to support our most vulnerable pupils.

The government should recognise that support staff are important to pupils' development and are integral to the smooth running of schools.

That TAs are an integral part of the school staff team and should receive more acknowledgment rather than this being an afterthought; that TAs do teach; that TAs

do add value; that TAs need a professional pathway; that TAs should be trained, mentored and supported in school as much as teachers are.

The government in England has committed over £1 billion for catch-up programmes of different kinds, in most cases assuming external provision will help make up any gaps in pupil learning. In Scotland, with its longer and more embedded ways of working in partnership with all the key stakeholders in the sector, different more collaborative approaches are being tried¹³. We would expect each of the four countries in the UK to establish their own educational priorities going forward¹⁴. In each case, our survey data suggest that the staff best placed to help pupils catch up are those already in place and able to support them, based on what they already know: our TA/CAs, working alongside our teachers.

Conclusion

Our survey data present a clear picture of TA/CAs as committed professionals, who have stepped up to the challenges presented by the crisis adeptly and selflessly. Over the course of the pandemic, much of the public debate about schools and COVID has centred on teachers: their safety concerns; when and how schools will fully reopen. Yet the voices of TA/CAs – almost one in three (28%) people working in our schools¹⁵ – have gone unheard. That their efforts have gone largely unnoticed suggests to us that at least as far as education is concerned, TA/CAs have indeed been the unsung heroes of this pandemic.

Most teaching assistants will rise to the tasks put upon them, no matter how challenging or demanding. And the majority of TAs will always put the wellbeing and happiness of pupils above all else – even to the detriment of their own wellbeing.

Teaching assistants and support staff need to be recognised as important role in the community. Lots of people are thanking teachers and overlooking the support staff. We attend school every day too!

¹³ See: <https://www.gov.scot/groups/covid-19-education-recovery-group/>

¹⁴ See: <https://gov.wales/device-and-connectivity-update-digitally-excluded-learners-during-coronavirus-covid-19-html>

¹⁵ See: England, Department for Education (2021) *School Workforce in England: November 2019*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england>; Scottish Government (2021) *School Support Staff 2019*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/school-support-staff-statistics/>. Welsh Government (2021) *Support Staff by School and Category, 2020*. <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/teachers-and-support-staff/School-Staff/supportstaff-by-school-category>

At this point in the crisis, as the education administrations in the four nations take stock of where we are and begin to assess how schools can best rebuild from the pandemic, we need everyone's voices to be included: pupils, parents, TA/CAs, teachers, support staff, as well as system leaders.

Recommendations

Schools really are communities – they are at their best when they recognise, value and support the contribution of each individual. In this spirit, we make three recommendations arising directly from the data we have collected.

- 1. Consider staff wellbeing as well as pupil wellbeing.** The pandemic has placed enormous strains on everyone within the school community, not least the staff. In thinking ahead to how schools might manage the return to normal functioning, staff wellbeing needs to be part of the mix. In some schools, staff morale post-pandemic may need particular attention. Resilient schools require resilient staff. This matters as the effects from the pandemic will ripple on for some while yet. To meet these challenges, taking care of staff should be as much of a priority as taking care of pupils.¹⁶
- 2. Invest in TA/CAs' local knowledge.** TA/CAs are a locally-based resource, already in situ, who have a unique understanding and clear view of what matters most within their community and for their pupils. That comes not only from having been on the frontline for the duration of the crisis, but from intimate knowledge of the community their school serves, and of which they are often part. Schools can and should draw on TA/CAs' knowledge and understanding to enrich the learning of the pupils they support in the context of the wider school reopening. Funding should be directed to make use of their skills in their local setting.
- 3. All staff, whatever their role, need to be part of build-back planning.** In our data many TA/CAs voiced their concern about feeling peripheral to the school community, rather than at its heart. As schools plan for the future, now is the time to fully recognise the important part TA/CAs play in the fabric of the school and build them into those conversations. Such recognition will go a long way to re-setting the dial and helping everyone build back better.

¹⁶ Harmeey, S. and Moss, G. (2020) Learning Loss versus Learning Disruption: Written evidence submitted by the International Literacy Centre, UCL, Institute of Education, to the Education Select

TA/CAs are the mortar in the brickwork of our schools. Much of what schools achieve would be unimaginable without them, yet all too often their work goes unnoticed and unremarked.¹⁷ This survey has highlighted quite how much TA/CAs have done at this difficult time to keep schools functioning. One good outcome from the crisis would be if TA/CAs were more fully and deliberately involved in a national conversation about education going forward— including any audit of preparedness for future pandemics. Certainly, much more purpose and thought must be given at the policy level to their role and contribution. TA/CAs deserve no less, if their value and potential is to be realised.

¹⁷ Webster, R. Bosanquet, P., Franklin, S. & Parker, M. (2021) *Maximising the impact of teaching assistants in primary schools: Guidance for school leaders*. Oxon: Routledge

Appendix 1: Data and Methods

The questionnaire for this project was distributed between 20th January and 5th February 2021. It was advertised via Unison, twitter, and on social media. Questions offered respondents a choice of statements to agree with. Two questions (question 7 and 8) used a 4 item Likert scale ranging from very important to not important. If other was selected as a response, respondents were given an opportunity to expand the response in the form of a text entry. We asked respondents to indicate the region that they worked in, unison membership, the setting they worked in, and what was the proportion of pupils from socio-economically disadvantaged homes in their school (most, many, some, a few, or none). We asked at the end of the survey if respondents would be willing to be contacted for an interview. In total, we had 9055 valid responses (i.e. respondents who completed the survey). 95% (n = 8426) of respondents were UNISON members.

The Questionnaire

The questions asked were

1. Are you working in any of the following pupil/class support roles in schools in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland or Wales?
2. In your support role, which of the following have *YOU* personally been involved with this last week? Tick any that apply.
3. Since March last year when the pandemic began, how has your role in supporting pupils changed? Tick any statements that apply to you.
4. To help schools function during the pandemic, which of the following have you been doing? Tick any that apply.
5. To support pupils who are LEARNING IN SCHOOL during the pandemic, which of the following have you been involved with? Tick any that apply .
6. To SUPPORT REMOTE LEARNING during the pandemic, which of the following have you been involved with? Tick any that apply.
7. When this lockdown ends, which of the following do you think will matter most in YOUR SCHOOL? Please rank the importance of each statement.
8. From your interactions with families and pupils over the pandemic, what do you think YOUR families will value most when schools fully reopen? Please rank the importance of each statement.
9. Thinking about YOUR experiences of working in school during COVID, tick any of these statements that you agree with:

10. Thinking about the consequences of the disruption to education COVID has caused for the PUPILS you work with, tick any of these statements that you agree with:

11. Thinking about what the education system as a whole might learn from the pandemic going forward, which of the following statements matters most to you?

Please tick up to three.

Demographics

Descriptive statistics were produced for each survey question. The descriptives were also run disaggregated by setting, SES status, and region.

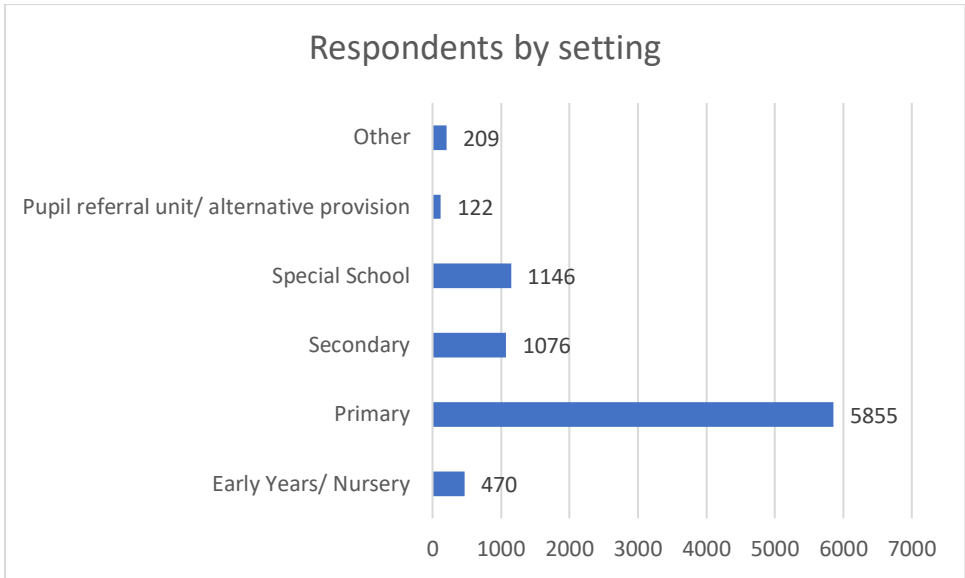
1a. Respondents by setting

Most respondents worked in the primary sector (65%, n = 5855) with early years (5%, n = 470) bringing the primary and early year sectors to 70%. Smaller numbers working in special schools (13%, n = 1146) and alternative provision/ pupil referral unit (1%, n = 122). 12 % (n = 1076) worked in secondary schools. 2.3% of respondents indicated that they worked in other settings and there was 2% missing data (n = 177) for this question. In comparison, workforce data¹⁸ suggest this pattern to TA sector employment:

- 72% were based in primary and nursery settings
- 16% were based in secondary schools.
- 12% were based in state-funded special schools, such as special schools, Alternative provision (APs) and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs).

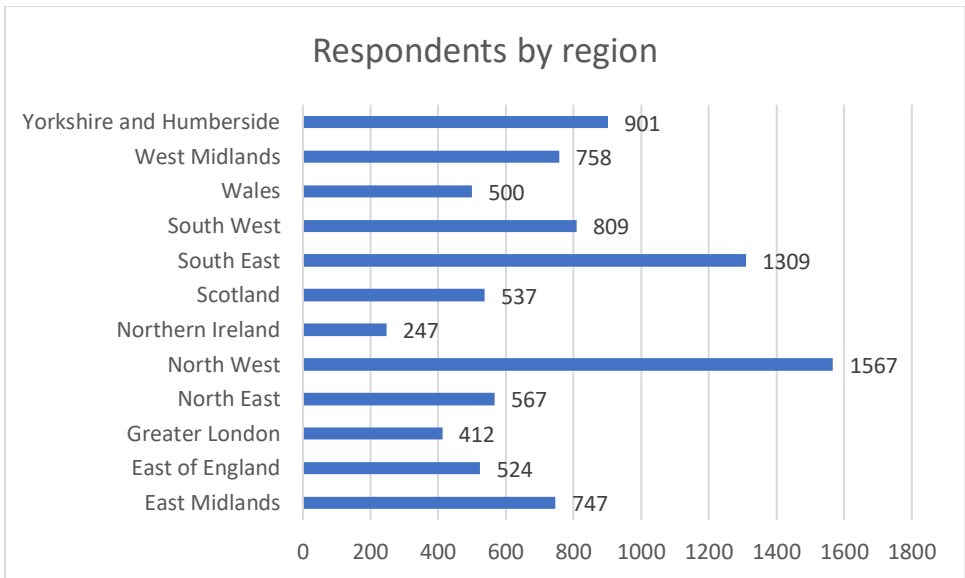
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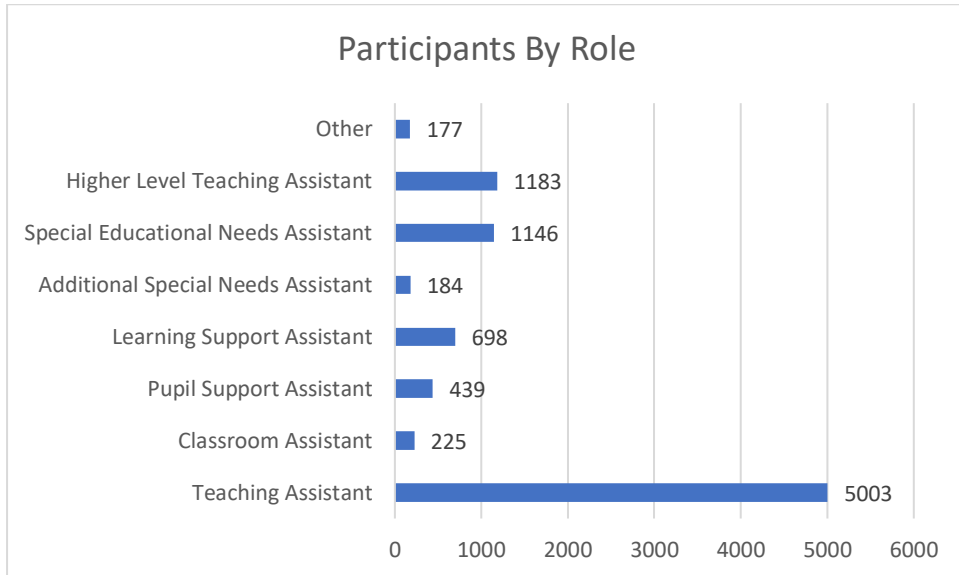
1b. Respondents by region

The largest number of responses came from TA/CAs in the Northwest (17.3%) and Southeast (14.4%) of England, areas which at the time had particularly high rates of COVID infection. Fewest responses came from Northern Ireland (2.7%)



1c. Role

The most common role descriptor was Teaching Assistant (55%); those working in a dedicated Special Needs role making up 14.6% of respondents



1d. SES

49% of respondents worked in schools where they considered many or most pupils to be socio-economically disadvantaged.

