

Spotlight

Effective use of teaching assistants to support students with disability

November 2025



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The key messages in this Spotlight reveal that:

- ⚡ Effective use of teaching assistants can benefit several student cohorts, promote more inclusive environments and enable students with disability to access education^[1].
- ⚡ However, some teaching assistant deployment models can reduce a student's interactions with teachers and peers. This can impede a student's academic and socio-emotional progress.
- ⚡ Teachers should remain responsible for pedagogical content knowledge and differentiation required for students with disability.
- ⚡ Teaching assistants predominantly improve student learning outcomes through the delivery of evidence-based interventions they have been specifically trained to deliver, including both learning and behaviour-based interventions.
- ⚡ Professional learning for both teachers and teaching assistants is one way to ensure clarity of roles in supporting students.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands, sea countries, and waterways from across Australia. We pay our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and living cultures; and to Elders past and present.

Introduction

In this Spotlight, the term ‘teaching assistants’ encompasses school support staff who work closely with teachers and students, primarily within the classroom or similar learning environments. Teaching assistants may have varying job titles, with examples including teacher aides, classroom assistants, school support workers, special support officers, learning support workers, educational paraprofessionals, paraeducators, Aboriginal education workers, or integration/inclusion aides (Butt & Lowe, 2011; Green, 2023). Generally, teaching assistants are staff employed to support:

- specific students (including those with disability),
- specific cohorts of students (e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students),
- the academic achievement of a school, or
- the teacher (and thus teaching and learning more generally).

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has developed *Guidelines for the Optimal Deployment of Teaching Assistants in Australian Classrooms* (AITSL, 2025). These Guidelines set out 7 evidence-informed strategies to help schools and systems maximise the impact of teaching assistants in supporting student progress and achievement, and in reducing teacher workload.

While the Guidelines provide practical advice, this Spotlight draws on research evidence to further examine the ways teaching assistants are deployed, the outcomes associated with different approaches, and opportunities to improve practice.

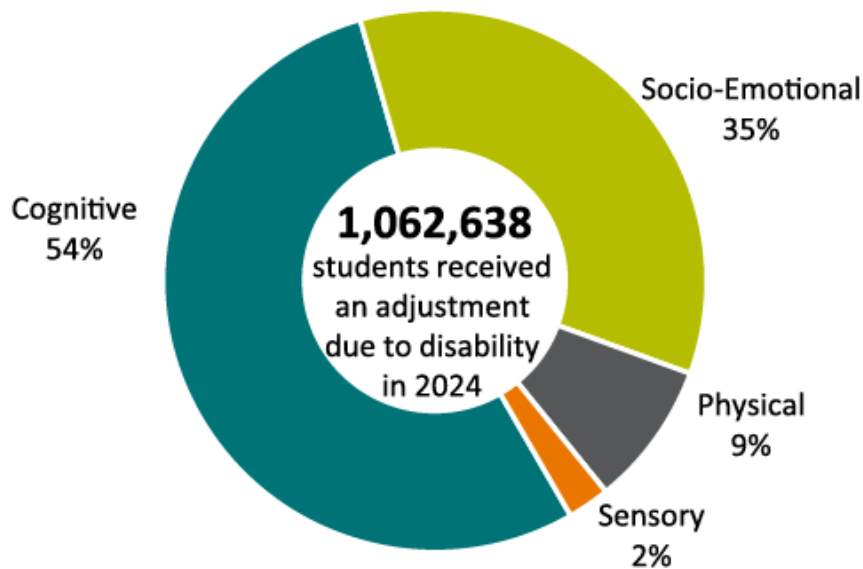
Historically, teaching assistants were more likely to undertake classroom and administrative duties to support teachers (Keller et al., 2007), however, there is an increasing focus on these staff supporting students and learning. While many teaching assistants currently still provide operational and administrative support, they may also be involved in providing direct instructional support and/or personal support to students with disability. Given the increased demand for teaching assistants to support students with disability, this Spotlight summarises how their deployment can influence student outcomes as well as options for improving outcomes for students with disability.

Support for students with disability

Need for teaching assistant support

Under the *Disability Standards for Education* (2005), Australian schools and educators have a legal obligation to make reasonable adjustments^[2] to enable students with disability to participate and learn on the same basis as students without disability. In 2024, more than one million Australian school students received an educational adjustment due to disability (Figure 1; (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2024). This means 1 in every 4 students (25.7%) required additional assistance; approximately half of these students (54%) listed a cognitive disability as their main disability (ACARA, 2024).

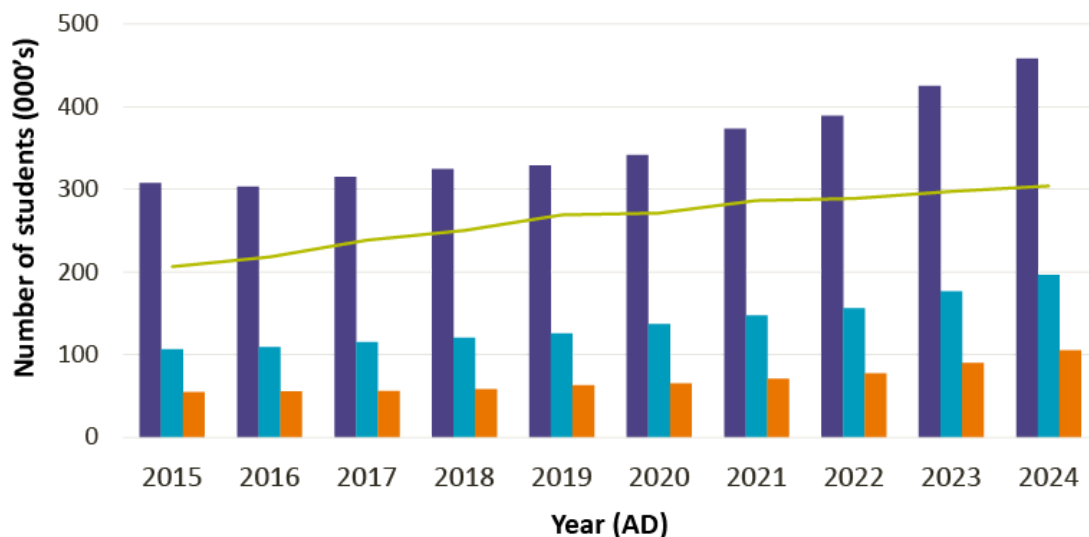
Figure 1. The relative proportion of school students who needed an adjustment due to a disability in 2024, by disability classification. Data from ACARA (2024).



The number and proportion of Australian school students who require an educational adjustment have increased markedly in recent years (Figure 2). For example, between 2021 and 2024:

- the number of students who required extensive adjustments (constant, intensive support, predominantly requiring 1:1 assistance) increased by 47.8%, equating to an extra 34,064 students
- students who required substantial adjustments (significant support for most activities) increased by 33.2%, equating to an additional 49,043 students (ACARA, 2024).

Figure 2. The number of students requiring adjustments due to a disability has increased during recent years, across all adjustment categories. Data from ACARA (2024).



Supplementary adjustments: additional support at specific times to augment the strategies and resources already available for all students within the school (e.g. tailored programs, specialised technology, intermittent staff support)

Substantial adjustments: address significant barriers to learning, participation and achievement with support needed across the curriculum, most of the time, on most days. Adjustments may span learning, behavioural or health/care aspects.

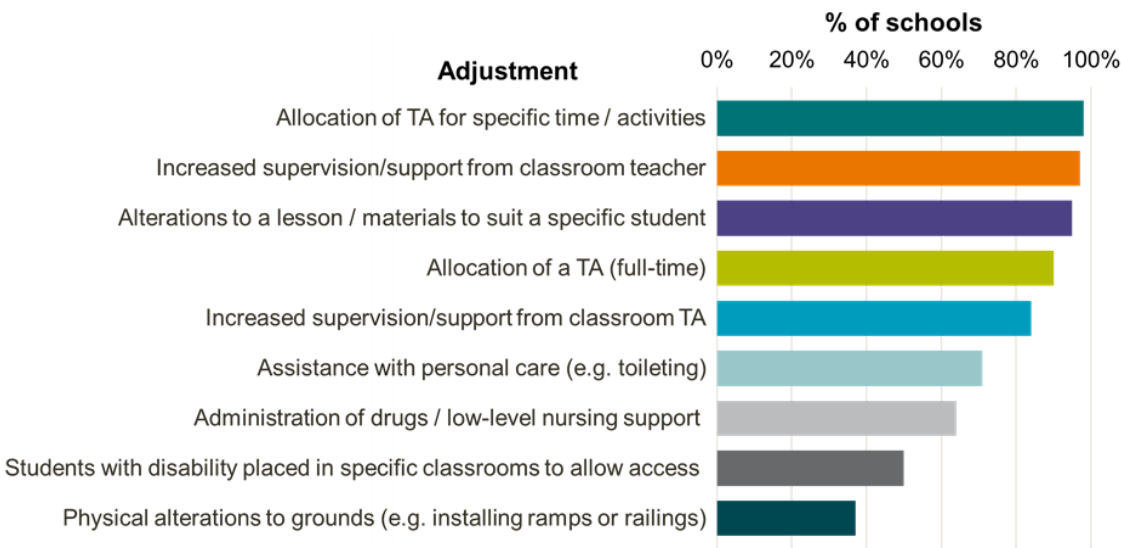
Extensive adjustments: comprise targeted measures and sustained levels of intensive support. These adjustments are highly individualised, comprehensive and ongoing.

Support within Quality Differentiated Teaching Practice (QDTP): the functional impact of disability or other learning requirements is managed by the teacher and school staff (including via personalised learning) without drawing on additional resources

Given the growing number of students with identified disability, most schools now promote an inclusive learning environment offering differentiation and personalised learning for each student. Many schools regard teaching assistant support as the primary mechanism to accommodate students with additional learning or accessibility requirements (Giangreco et al., 2010). Allocation of teaching assistant time is the most common adjustment for students with disability in Australia (Figure 3; Carter et al., 2022; Walsh, 2012). Consequently, many teaching assistant roles have been funded to explicitly support students with disability to participate in educational activities (Blatchford et al., 2006, 2009; Chambers, 2015), whether that be within mainstream schools or specialised settings^[3] (e.g. special schools).

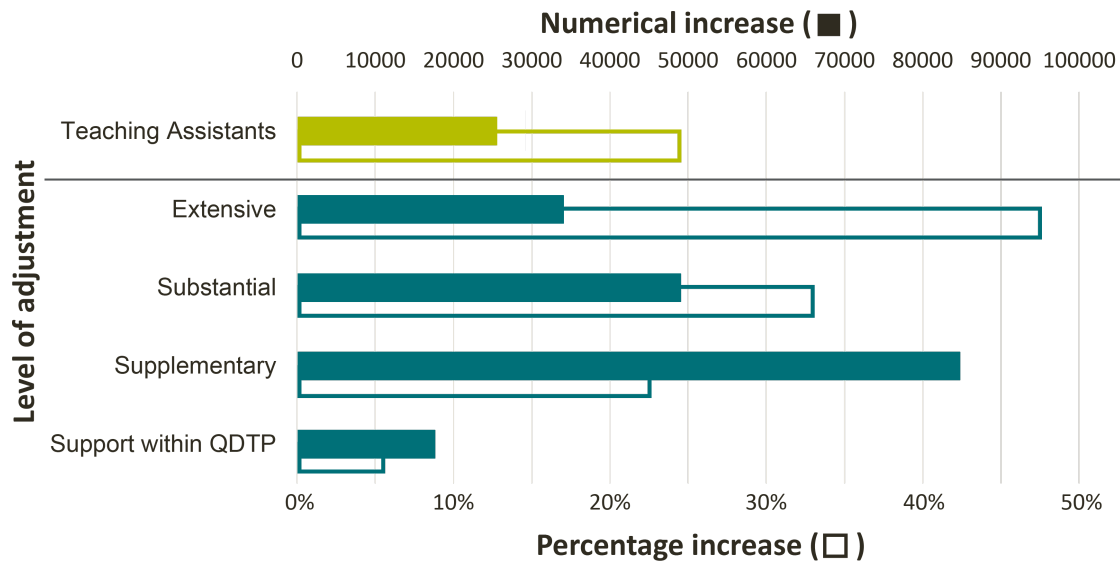
Today, most teaching assistants support students with disability, or students with additional learning or accessibility requirements more generally. Without such support, some students would be prevented from accessing mainstream schools or specialised settings, thus **teaching assistants play a crucial role in enabling inclusive education**.

Figure 3. Examples of adjustments made to accommodate students with disability within public primary schools in Brisbane and the percentage of schools that have implemented these. Data from Walsh (2012).



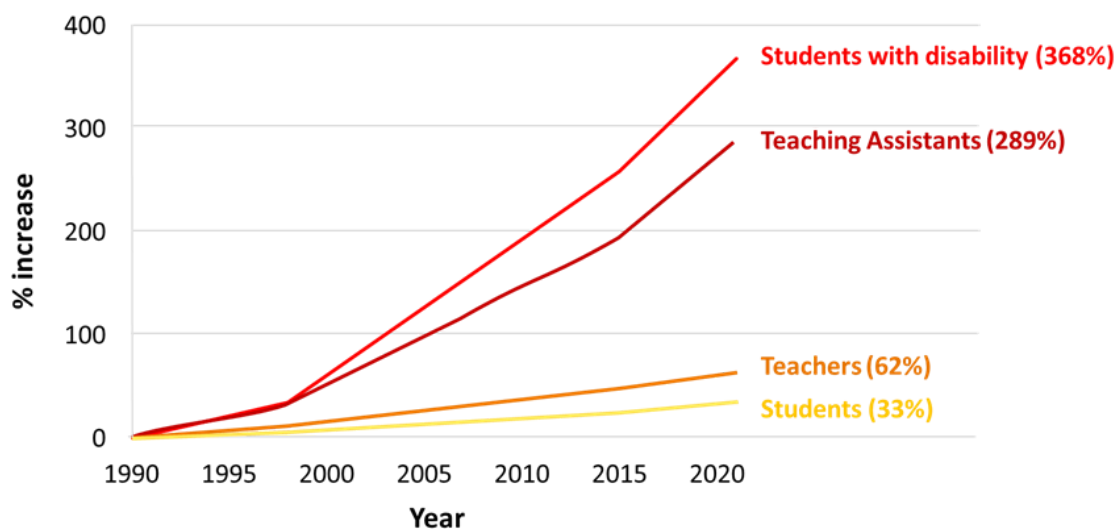
With the rising number of students identified as requiring educational adjustments, and the preferred support mechanism being through teaching assistant time, there is an increased demand for teaching assistants both globally and within Australia (Figure 4). An additional 26,300 teaching assistants were recorded in Australia between 2021 and 2024, an almost 25% increase (Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA), 2024), which loosely translates to one additional teaching assistant for every three extra students with substantial or extensive adjustments. Given that students with extensive adjustments predominantly need continual 1:1 support, this may suggest insufficient teaching assistant support (or funding) to meet demand.

Figure 4. The number of teaching assistants and students with disability (shown by the level of adjustment required) has increased markedly between 2021 and 2024. Student disability data from ACARA (2024); teaching assistant data from JSA (2024).



Longer term, the percentage increase in teaching assistants and students with disability seen between 1990 and 2021 far exceeds the percentage increase in teachers and the overall student population (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The percentage increase, relative to 1990 values, seen in the number of teachers, teaching assistants, the total student population, and students with disabilities. The 1990 data for students with disabilities has been calculated using a linear extrapolation of the increase between 1988 and 1998, based on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 1990, 2000), Image adapted from Sonnemann, (2022).



Some, but not all, of the large increase in students with disability (and teaching assistants) seen within this time frame results from the recognition of some health conditions as disability. For example, the classification of autism spectrum disorders and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) as disabilities likely explains the trajectory change seen shortly before 2000 (Productivity Commission, 2004).

Deployment of teaching assistants

Given the scope of teaching assistant support practices, deployment of teaching assistants typically uses one or more of three models (Figure 6):

Figure 6. Common deployment models for teaching assistants.

General classroom deployment

A **qualified teacher** and the **teaching assistant** work collaboratively to address the needs of all students (regardless of **additional learning or accessibility requirements**). This may involve rotating between groups so that all students work with the teacher and the teaching assistant either within, or across several lessons. This can include what is colloquially known as the helicopter model, where the teaching assistant 'hovers' in the background, provides assistance when needed but then moves on to allow students to work on their own again (Alston, 2020).



Targeted in-class deployment

Qualified teachers primarily work with students who don't have additional learning or accessibility requirements

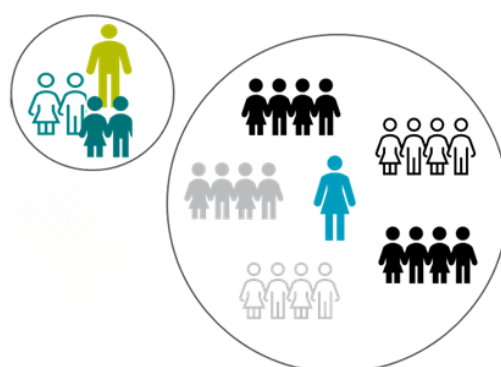
Teaching assistant solely works with **students with additional learning or accessibility requirements** but within the same room as the rest of the class. Traditionally, the teaching assistant and the student(s) they support would be seated slightly apart from other students.



Targeted intervention deployment

Qualified teachers work with students of varying ability in mainstream classrooms.

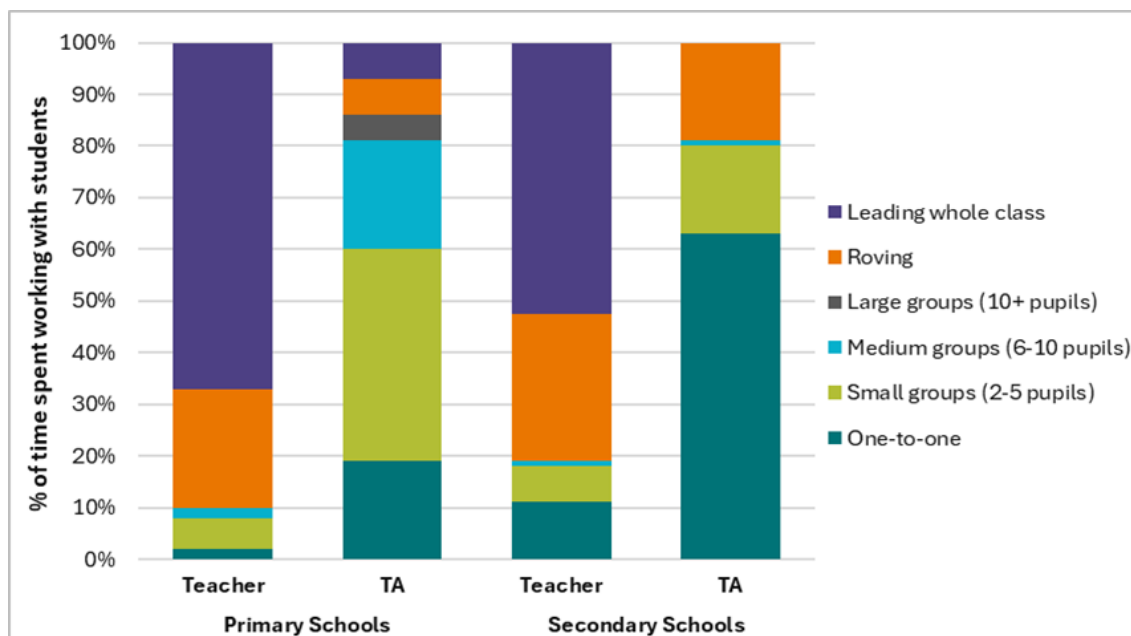
Teaching assistants take nominated students (often **students with additional learning or accessibility requirements**) out of their usual classes to provide additional support in nominated areas. This will often comprise delivering evidence-based programs. Research indicates this approach is most effective when teaching assistants are specifically trained for the selected interventions.



These deployment models are widely used in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the US (e.g. Education Review Office (ERO), 2022; Skipp & Hopwood, 2019) and the choice of model(s) can depend on the aim, school context, funding source and/or other factors. Many schools use a combination of models to provide greater flexibility in meeting the needs of students and teachers. An example of deployment varying with school context is a study from the UK, which showed that teaching assistants in primary schools spent a greater proportion of time with small or medium-sized student groups, and in secondary settings, teaching assistants

mostly worked with individual students or roved around the classroom (Figure 7; Blatchford et al., 2009). Furthermore, teaching assistants only led whole classes in primary school settings; this practice was not seen in secondary schools within the study.

Figure 7. Observational data from the UK showed teachers and teaching assistants interact with students differently in primary and secondary school settings. Data from Blatchford et al. (2009).



One of the few existing studies of teaching assistant deployment in Australian schools observed 41 teaching assistants in 4 schools from the Australian Capital Territory. Multiple models of deployment were used to support students with disability, both within and across the schools (Butt, 2016). These included dedicated classroom support for individual students, in-class support targeting multiple, pre-identified students and targeted out-of-class support for individual students and small groups.

Irrespective of the deployment model, the study found teaching assistants only assisted students with disability while qualified teachers primarily spent their time teaching students without disability (Butt 2016). This potentially resulted from the funding for teaching assistant positions within those schools being specifically linked to support for students with disability. A similar division of labour has, however, been reported in other countries, including in situations where teaching assistants were employed to support teachers rather than students with disability (e.g. Blatchford et al., 2006; Rose, 2020).

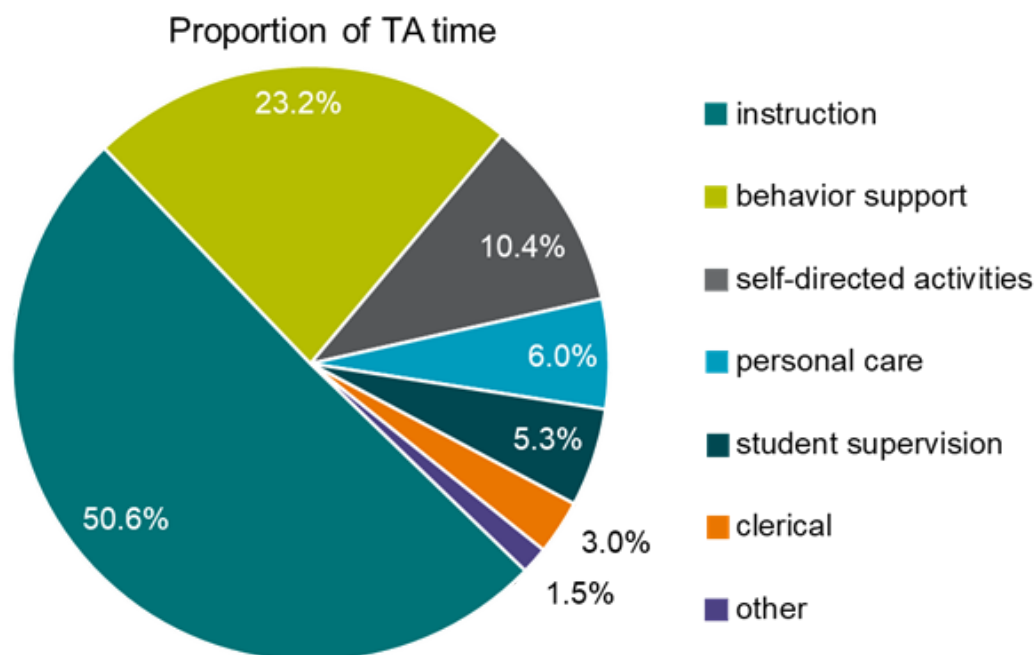
Types of teaching assistant support

Historically, most students with intellectual disabilities attended specialised settings (e.g. special schools), and assistance for students with disability in mainstream schools focused on addressing physical needs, such as personal care or accessibility. Within specialised settings, the support teaching assistants offered to students was much broader, potentially including physical, emotional and learning support according to the needs of individual students.

The shift towards greater inclusion of students with additional learning requirements in mainstream schools has significantly expanded the types of support that teaching assistants are expected to provide; moreover, the need for learning and behavioural support has also been increasingly recognised over the last few decades (Alborz et al., 2009; Rose, 2020;

Sharma & Salend, 2016). For example, a study of 32 schools in the US found that paraprofessionals typically spent half their time on instructional tasks, with almost a quarter of their time spent providing behavioural support (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Survey data showing the proportion of time that teaching assistants in Vermont (US) spent on different types of tasks. Data from Giangreco et al. (2013).

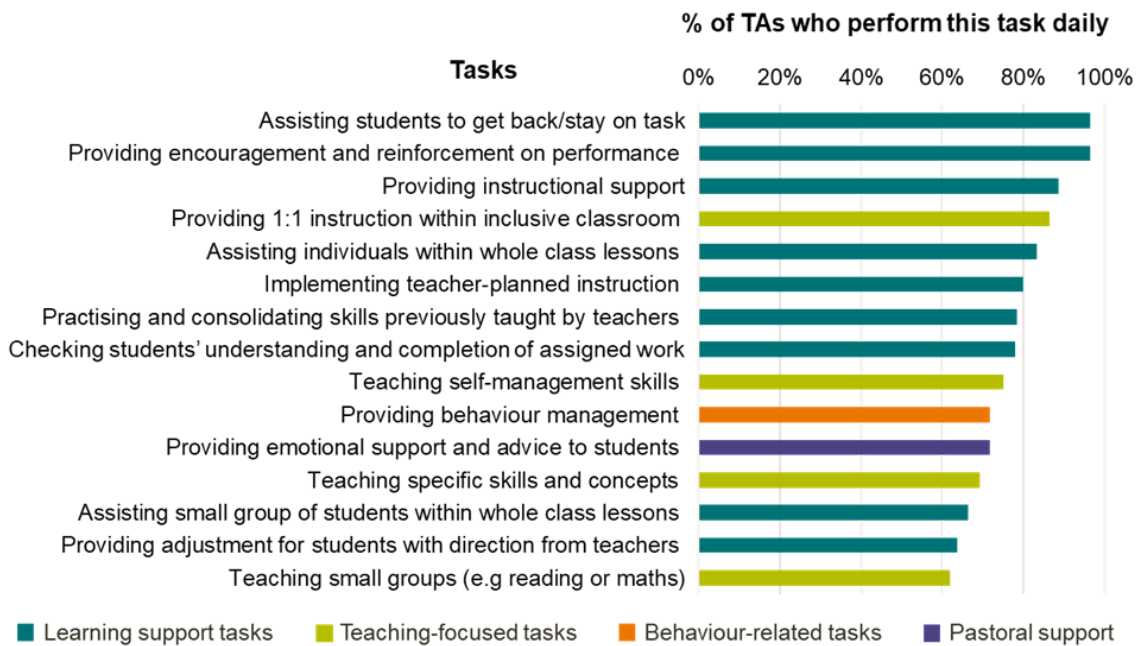


A recent review undertaken by AITSL (unpublished) found that instructional duties were mentioned within 75% of job advertisements or position descriptions for teaching assistant roles in Australia. Another review, undertaken 10 years earlier, similarly reported instructional duties mentioned in 85% of Australian advertisements for teaching assistants (Stephenson & Carter, 2014).

Substantiating these findings, more than 80% of NSW teaching assistants reported undertaking 1:1 instruction on a daily basis (Figure 9, Carter et al., 2019) and a survey of 20 teaching assistants from Queensland found they all undertook instructional duties (Harris & Aprile, 2015). Internationally, teaching assistants also frequently undertake instructional roles, including individualised and small-group instruction to students with disability, teaching larger groups of students, and preparing and adapting teaching materials (Sharma & Salend, 2016).

Consequently, there can be a societal expectation that teaching assistants should improve student learning outcomes for students with disability, in addition to promoting social inclusion and fostering a greater sense of community and belonging (Alborz et al., 2009).

Figure 9. The fifteen most common tasks teaching assistants in NSW schools reported undertaking, and the proportion of teaching assistants that undertake these tasks at least once daily. Data from Carter et al. (2019).



Over the last decade, an increasing number of studies have reported that teaching assistants spend the majority of their time undertaking direct instruction with one or more students (e.g. Giangreco et al., 2013; Green, 2023; Harris & Aprile, 2015; Webster et al., 2011). For example, a survey of 1,000 primary schools in Scotland found that most teaching assistants taught new concepts and set learning tasks (Warhurst et al., 2014); tasks that would more typically be regarded as the remit of teachers. Similarly, the literature notes that some teaching assistants have made (or been expected to make) curricular decisions without consulting teachers, with some teaching assistants also involved in assessing student performance (Sharma & Salend, 2016). Some concerns have been raised as to the appropriateness of teaching assistants undertaking such tasks when they do not have the training and knowledge of teachers (Giangreco, 2013).

Does teaching assistant support improve outcomes for students with disability?

What do people say?

Although teaching assistant support appears to be the most common adjustment employed for students with disability, minimal evaluation of the impacts has been undertaken. Where such evaluations have been attempted, they have largely relied on the perspectives of teachers, teaching assistants and school leaders. Qualitative surveys of school staff, parents and students with disability typically report that teaching assistants improve outcomes for students with disability (Alborz et al., 2009). Educational outcomes are broad in nature and studies may define, examine and report on various aspects. For example, respondents to the survey of Brisbane primary schools believed the adjustments made for students with disability were effective overall (92%) and facilitated their inclusion (94%) (Walsh, 2012). However, fewer than half of the respondents said these students met the relevant literacy and numeracy benchmarks (Walsh, 2012), suggesting some variation in effectiveness for particular outcomes.

Challenges may occur where teaching assistants are tasked with instructional duties without the necessary support and professional learning, giving rise to potential risks to student academic achievement, especially at the secondary school level. For example, a study of teaching assistants working with students with disability in a South Australian senior secondary setting revealed:

- teaching assistants encountered difficulties in supporting multiple teachers across various curriculum areas, with some mismatch between the teaching assistants' expertise and the subject matter requirements
- teaching assistants were concerned about confusing students due to their own limited knowledge and thus were less willing to answer students' questions
- students were less trusting of their teaching assistant when it became clear they didn't know the curriculum (Howard & Ford, 2007).

In addition to academic achievement, social development is another student outcome that is of interest to many researchers, educators and parents. While many parents, teachers and students with learning disability report teaching assistants improve relational skills, students often developed 'friendships' with the teaching assistants, rather than their peers (Alborz et al., 2009).

What do observations show?

Students' social reliance on teaching assistants was investigated using observations of mainstream primary school classes in England and Wales. Periodic observations made between 1976 and 2012 indicate that peer interactions for students with disability have remained at around 18%, while peer interactions for students without disability have increased from 19% to 36% within the same timeframe (Webster, 2015). Instead of spending as much time interacting with peers, students with disability interact with teaching assistants for 20% of class time. This suggests the presence of teaching assistants may inhibit the development of peer friendships and the socio-emotional development of supported students (Webster, 2015; Webster & Blatchford, 2013).

These data only capture part of the story, however, as students with disability also spend more time outside the classroom (for example, participating in interventions or support groups), further reducing peer interactions (Webster, 2015). Students with disability also have fewer interactions with their teacher than students without disability; this has become more pronounced with increased deployment of teaching assistants suggesting teaching assistant support is partly replacing teacher support or instruction (Webster, 2015; Webster & Blatchford, 2019).

The research literature demonstrates that:

1. the increased presence of teaching assistants may displace interactions of the supported students with their teachers and peers,
2. classroom teachers typically spend less time with students supported by teaching assistants,
3. a teaching assistant may become a student's main/sole educator by default, negatively impacting student development (ERO, 2022).

What do outcome data indicate?

Research examining the influence of teaching assistants on student outcomes shows the model of deployment has a significant impact, especially with regards to student achievement. This section reviews the evidence for each deployment model.

General classroom deployment

Several studies suggest the general classroom deployment model may improve outcomes for students with disability, or from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, a large-scale study of students who attended mainstream kindergartens in the US, in 2011, found students with disability who were placed in classrooms with teaching assistants had higher achievement outcomes compared to similar students in general

classrooms without teaching assistants (Gottfried, 2017). Classroom deployment of a teaching assistant resulted in higher scores in reading and mathematics for students with disability if they attended for full days but not half days (Gottfried, 2017).

Additionally, a Danish trial involving 125 schools found that having an extra teaching assistant or teacher assigned to a classroom increased progress in student reading, relative to classes without additional staff (Andersen et al., 2023; Navarro, 2015), although due to cost constraints the additional teacher worked 10 hours per week, compared to 14 hours per week by the teaching assistant. The positive outcomes were more pronounced for students with disability, or from disadvantaged backgrounds. An earlier literature review suggested that general classroom deployment does not improve outcomes for students with disability (Sharma & Salend, 2016) but the articles included within this varied in quality (Cullen et al., 2020) suggesting a need for further research.

Targeted in-class deployment

On an international level, the most robust information about the impact of time spent working closely with teaching assistants on outcomes is derived from the *Deployment and Impact of Support Staff* (DISS) project. Running from 2004 to 2008, this project involved 8,000+ students across seven different year levels in 77 primary and secondary schools in England. It used a combination of student outcome data, observations, and surveys of teachers and school leaders to assess how the deployment of teaching assistants altered outcomes for students with disability.

Contrary to expectations, an inverse relationship was found between the amount of time spent working intensively with a teaching assistant within a class and students' academic progress, across all year levels examined in these mainstream schools (Blatchford et al., 2006, 2009; Webster et al., 2010). The more intensive the support students received, the less progress they made in English, mathematics, and science; likely due to pedagogical and instructional roles being performed by the teaching assistant rather than the teacher (Blatchford et al., 2009). Several large US-based studies showed similar outcomes (Giangreco, 2013). This trend is most pronounced for students with disability, but also holds true for students without disability or other learning or accessibility requirements (Alborz et al., 2009).

Consequently, multiple authors recommend that when teaching assistants are required to work closely with students (e.g. for medical reasons or behavioural support), they should focus on encouraging interactions with peers and the teacher (e.g. ERO, 2022; Giangreco, 2013).

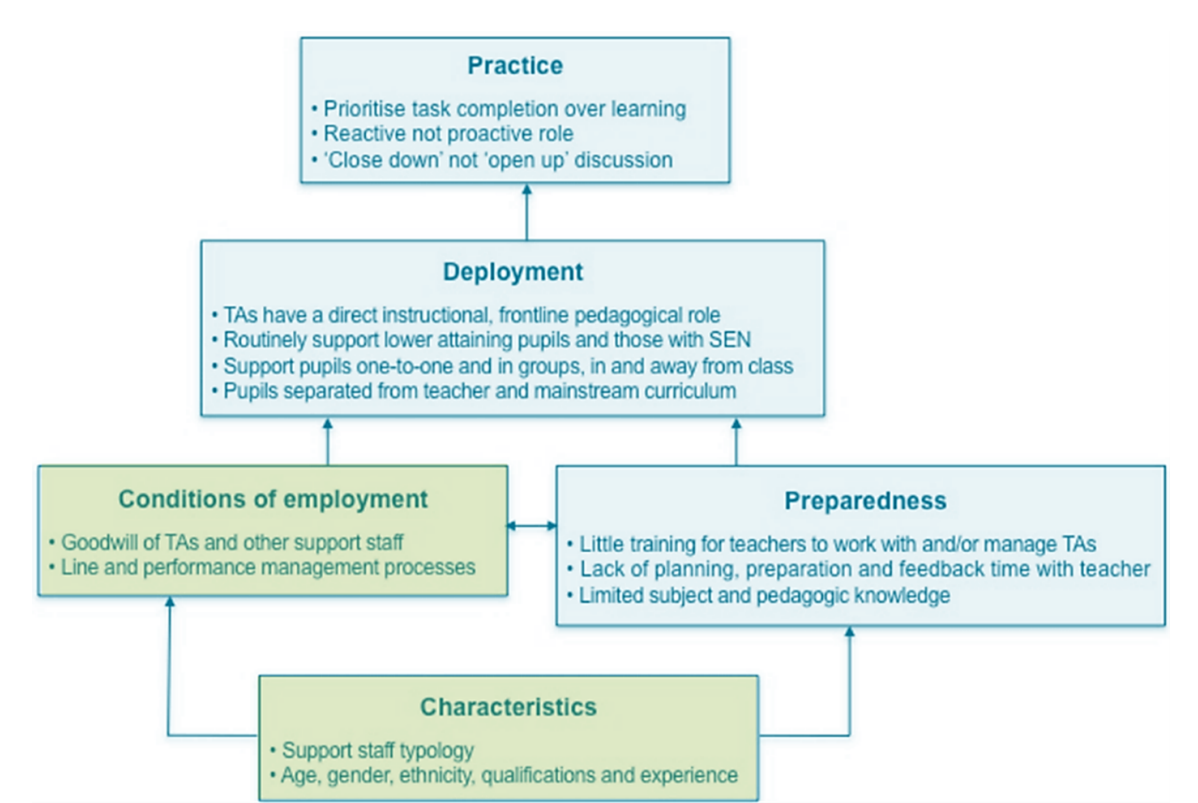
Why does intensive support from teaching assistants limit student progress?

The different variables influencing teaching assistant effectiveness are summarised in the Wider Pedagogical Role (WPR) model (Figure 10, Webster et al., 2011). The reported limited progress made by students with intensive teaching assistant support is predominantly linked to three components of this model; namely preparedness, deployment and practice (Webster et al., 2013).

The 'practice' component of the WPR model highlights the difference in how teachers and teaching assistants work with students. For example, teaching assistants are more likely to shut down questioning or conversation and to focus more on task completion than learning (Radford et al., 2011; Rubie-Davies et al., 2010; cited in Webster & Blatchford, 2019). Furthermore, while teachers spent more time on promoting cognitive engagement for students with class material, explaining concepts, and linking prior knowledge, teaching assistants were more likely to prompt students or provide the answers (Webster et al., 2011). The practice of teaching assistants can impede student progress by hindering student curiosity and inquisitiveness, discouraging students from thinking for themselves (Radford et al., 2015).

Consequently, professional learning for teaching assistants can focus on improving practice and pedagogy (see Professional learning below). Teaching assistants could be provided with detailed instructions and materials to follow, such as scripts for evidence-based interventions, and supported to develop their pedagogical knowledge.

Figure 10. The Wider Pedagogical Role model outlining the various factors that influence the effectiveness of teaching assistants. The blue boxes are aspects linked to teaching assistants' negative impacts on the academic outcomes of the students they support. Adapted from: Blatchford et al. (2013).



Teaching assistants often complete short courses focused on types of disability, and some teachers defer to the teaching assistant rather than engaging directly with the student. This may be due to some teachers having less confidence in teaching students with disability (e.g. Dimova et al., 2021; Punch, 2015). An observational study from England compared the teaching, support and interactions of 48 primary school students with moderate learning difficulties or behavioural, emotional and social difficulties, with those of 151 average-attaining students (Webster & Blatchford, 2013, 2015). They found teachers often failed to set appropriate tasks for students with learning difficulties, instead relying on teaching assistants to make classroom teaching accessible. However, this resulted in students with disability receiving less effective instruction compared to other students (Webster & Blatchford, 2019). Teachers need to adapt tasks, class activities and learning content for students with disability with explicit instructions to teaching assistants.

Surveys of teachers and teaching assistants have also identified multiple factors that either enhance or impede their ability to impact student outcomes (Jackson et al., 2021; Sharma & Salend, 2016), most of which overlap with the WPR model. For example, insufficient training, limited opportunities to communicate or collaborate with teachers, and insufficient supervision were all highlighted as barriers to effective performance (Table 1; Sharma & Salend, 2016). Uncertainty around their duties and role boundaries was also raised as an issue by teaching assistants, which may see them given direct instructional, pedagogical roles; a potential risk to students’ academic progress (Webster et al., 2011).

Table 1. Factors that teaching assistants identified as promoting or impeding their efficacy, as reported in Sharma & Salend (2016).

Factors that impede teaching assistant efficacy	Factors that promote teaching assistant efficacy
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Factors that impede teaching assistant efficacy	Factors that promote teaching assistant efficacy
Unclear and inconsistent guidelines and lack of clarity about their duties and/or responsibilities	Clear expectations but working flexibly
- Sporadic opportunities for professional learning - Limited induction process [if any provided]	Targeted professional learning for teaching assistants and the teachers they work with
Lack of communication with teachers about students, lesson planning and implementation	- Effective communication and collaboration - Sharing information (about students) and lessons and teaching practices
Insufficient supervision, support and feedback from teachers	- Sufficient planning time with teachers - Being observed by and receiving feedback from other professionals
- Feeling unappreciated and/or underpaid - Heavy workloads	Working in supportive teams of teaching assistants and teachers

Targeted intervention deployment

Several reviews of the influence of interventions delivered by teaching assistants have previously been published. Two reviews have shown targeted, evidence-based interventions delivered by teaching assistants can positively influence the social interactions of students with disability (Sharma & Salend, 2016; Sutton et al., 2019), one of which focused specifically on students with autism (Sutton et al., 2019). Additionally, two reviews focused on academic gains showed that when teaching assistants were well-trained and supported to deliver targeted interventions, they had a positive impact on the progress of students with learning disabilities, or with low literacy skills (Farrell et al., 2010; Sharma & Salend, 2016).

In contrast, non-targeted interventions and general classroom deployment did not show positive outcomes for student achievement. One review indicated that when teaching assistants closely adhered to guidance on how to deliver a specific intervention, the gain in student learning was similar to when teachers delivered the same intervention (Farrell et al., 2010). However, teaching assistants rarely receive sufficient training, supervision and support to deliver interventions effectively (Sharma & Salend, 2016).

Based on these three reviews, several recommendations have been made to ensure targeted interventions delivered by teaching assistants achieve the intended outcomes (Figure 11; Cullen et al., 2020). Key points include ensuring teachers remain responsible for appropriate pedagogical practice, providing professional learning and focusing on effective teaching practices.

Figure 11. Suggested actions to improve the effectiveness of teaching assistants based on reviews of targeted interventions. Adapted from Cullen et al., (2020).

Teachers should:	Schools should:
✓ select an evidence-based, relevant, targeted intervention; ✓ train the teaching assistant to deliver the intervention with fidelity; ✓ provide supervision; ✓ observe the teaching assistants working and provide feedback; and ✓ ensure that pupils with additional learning and accessibility requirements are included in the teacher's own whole class, small group and one-to-one pedagogical practice.	✓ ensure teaching assistants are well-trained and supervised ✓ ensure teaching assistants do not use ineffective instructional methods ✓ avoid teaching assistants constantly working with specific students

Broader studies of interventions delivered by teaching assistants

Multiple reviews demonstrate evidence-based interventions delivered by teaching assistants can positively influence the academic achievement of students more generally, (Alborz et al., 2009; Navarro, 2015; Nickow et al., 2020; Sharples et al., 2021). The evidence is strongest for literacy, with additional limited evidence available for numeracy interventions delivered by teaching assistants (Alborz et al., 2009; Baye et al., 2019; de Bruin et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2018; Sharples et al., 2021).

For example, multiple randomised control trials^[4] have shown the effectiveness of teaching assistant-led interventions in literacy, with only a few such trials demonstrating this for numeracy (Table 2; Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), 2021). On average, targeted interventions delivered by teaching assistants can increase student progress by 5 months^[5], although this is also slightly lower for numeracy than for literacy (EEF, 2021). Low-performing students and disadvantaged students from low socio-economic backgrounds appear to benefit most from targeted interventions (Dietrichson et al., 2017; Navarro, 2015).

Table 2. Evaluation results for literacy, memory and numeracy interventions led by teaching assistants (funded by the EEF). Adapted from EEF (2021).

Intervention	Description	Age	Specific Focus Areas	Learning Gain (effect size)
Nuffield Early Language Intervention	Oral language intervention	Early Years	Communication and language	+ 4 months (0.27)
REACH	Comprehension and oral language	Year 7, Year 8	Oral language and reading comprehension	+ 4 months (0.32) + 6 months (0.51)
Switch-on Reading	Reading recovery (10 weeks)	Year 5-7	Reading comprehension	+ 3 months (0.24)
Talk for Literacy	Oral language intervention	Year 7	Speaking and listening	+ 3 months (0.2)

Intervention	Description	Age	Specific Focus Areas	Learning Gain (effect size)
Catch Up Literacy	1:1 tailored teaching assistant support	Years 3-6	Working memory	+ 3 months (0.24)
Abracadabra (ABRA) – best possible conditions	Online or paper-based toolkit of age-appropriate activities	Year 1	phonics, fluency and comprehension	+ 3 months [paper] & + 2 months [online]
Abracadabra (ABRA) – everyday conditions	Online or paper-based toolkit of age-appropriate activities	Year 1	phonics, fluency and comprehension	+ 2 months [paper] & 0 months [online]
Improving working memory	Small groups led by teaching assistants	Years 3-6	Working memory	+ 3 months (0.24)
Catch Up Numeracy	1:1 instruction by teaching assistants for struggling learners	Years 2-6	-	+ 3 months (0.21)
onebillion	App-based tutoring supervised by teaching assistants	Year 1	Basic mathematics skills	+ 3 months (0.25)

It is important to ensure teaching assistants are trained both in the theory of the specific intervention(s) they deliver, as well as how to deliver the intervention (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2007; EEF, 2021). For example, all the interventions the EEF found to be effective included professional learning for teaching assistants as part of their process. In addition to improving teaching assistant capability, undertaking such learning is likely to increase the fidelity with which the teaching assistants deliver the intervention. Teachers should also monitor delivery of the intervention to ensure fidelity, as well as the quality of support provided by the teaching assistant. Furthermore, the use of teaching assistants to deliver interventions is consistent with recent recommendations regarding the use of a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) in Australian schools (e.g. Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), 2023, 2024a, 2024b).

In summary, this deployment model appears to strongly influence the impact of teaching assistants on student outcomes. Targeted intervention deployment appears to be an effective option for improving multiple student outcomes when teaching assistants are properly trained to deliver the specific intervention and adhere to delivery instructions. Additional recommendations on how to maximise the positive influence of teaching assistants are discussed below.

Recommendations to optimise the impact of teaching assistants

Numerous recommendations to optimise the impact of teaching assistants in educational settings have been made over the last few decades. These recommendations typically address issues raised in the Wider Pedagogical Role (WPR) model, especially with regard to the preparedness, deployment and practice of teaching assistants. Depending on the purpose, recommendations ranged from what tasks teachers could (or should) delegate, to focusing on holistic approaches, or embedding support staff in all classrooms.

In 2023, AITSL was commissioned to develop the *Guidelines for the Optimal Deployment of Teaching Assistants in Australian Classrooms*. These Guidelines draw on an Australian and international research base and wide consultation with the profession. They provide 7 practical, evidence-based strategies to support schools in deploying teaching assistants most effectively. They complement and extend the research presented in this Spotlight, offering advice for school leaders and teachers on how to maximise the impact of teaching assistants on student learning and teacher workload.

Figure 12. Seven strategies to support optimal deployment of teaching assistants (AITSL, 2025)

School-wide strategies			
1. School-wide approach to deployment	2. Clear role expectations	3. Opportunities for collaboration	4. Professional learning opportunities
Classroom-based strategies			
5. Implementing interventions underpinned by evidence	6. Clear teaching and learning approach	7. Administrative, operational and supervisory support	
Support workload reduction and a lift in student progress and achievement			

Existing recommendations to improve the impact of teaching assistants on student outcomes (Causton-Theoharis et al. 2007; Giangreco, 2013; Sharples et al. 2018) emphasise:

- teaching assistants should be used to provide supplemental learning support and not replace interactions with the teacher
- teaching assistants should be properly trained to develop the independent learning skills of students
- teaching assistants can be effectively deployed to deliver evidence-based interventions when they follow explicit instructions or guidance materials (and don't make pedagogical decisions)
- teaching assistants require specific training on any interventions they deliver, as well as in behaviour management
- better communication with, and management by, teachers is essential.

Focusing more specifically on students with disability, New Zealand's ERO explicitly considers the needs of students with disability, and best practices for the teachers and teaching assistants who support these students. The recommendations for teaching assistants who support students with disability reflect concerns raised by previous research; for example, the need for teaching assistants to support student autonomy and peer relationships is emphasised (ERO, 2022).

Principles for collaborative support of students with disability

Good practice for teaching assistants who support students with disability (ERO, 2022):

- Teaching assistants work with teachers, specialists, and experts to understand and implement strategies, techniques, and resources.
- Teaching assistants consistently support learners' autonomy and agency.
- Teaching assistants actively promote inclusion, peer-to-peer learning, and friendships.

Good practice for schools to improve the support teaching assistants provide students with disability (ERO, 2022):

- Robust training and support for teachers and teaching assistants, that encompasses planned strategies, techniques, use of resources, and equipment.
- Good communication with teaching assistants, including meetings.
- Leaders and teachers providing professional guidance, and using a collaborative approach, to support learners' autonomy and agency.
- Leaders and teachers carefully arranging timetables, classrooms, and learning contexts.

A multi-pronged approach is likely needed to overcome current issues with the deployment of teaching assistants and improve outcomes for students with disability. This requires not only improving current deployment and practice of teaching assistants (and the teachers they work with) but also reconsidering when teaching assistant support is provided, alternatives to teaching assistant deployment, and how over-reliance on this resource can be reduced (Table 3; Giangreco, 2013).

Table 3. Selected ways to reduce over-reliance on teaching assistants by both the students they support and the schools who employ them. The term 'students with special needs' is used instead of the preferred term 'students with additional learning or accessibility requirements', as per the original reference. Source: Giangreco (2013).

Alternative	Brief Description
Co-teaching	Co-teaching involves assigning teachers and special education teacher to work together in the same classroom. To maintain a naturally occurring number of students with special needs, it may be necessary to share the special education teacher or across three or four classes, depending on class size.
Building capacity of teachers	Building teacher capacity (e.g., expectations of teacher engagement with students with disability, differentiated instruction, universal design, response to instruction, positive behaviour supports, curriculum overlapping, assistive technology) can reduce overreliance on teacher assistants.
Peer supports	Encouraging peer support strategies can provide natural ways to support students with disability that may benefit all students.

Alternative	Brief Description
Self-determination	Purposely teaching self-determination skills provides opportunities for students with disability to have a voice in determining their own supports.
Teacher assistant pools	Establishing a small pool of highly skilled teacher assistants (or one floating position for a small school) allows for their temporary assignments to address specific, short-term needs.
Fading plans	In cases where a student receives a substantial amount of teacher assistant support, developing a plan to fade that support as much as possible can lead to greater student independence and more natural supports.

For example, **teaching students about self-determination and formally planning to taper teaching assistant support over time (to promote student independence) will better equip students for their future learning and life.** This is a timely reminder that teaching assistants should not be regarded as the default option for supporting students with a disability, but careful consideration should be given to the needs of the individual students, the capacity of other staff, and alternative adjustments that could reduce the need for intensive teaching assistant support. When teaching assistants are used, it is important to ensure there is sufficient communication and collaboration with teachers and that appropriate professional learning is available for teachers and teaching assistants alike. As such, research findings on these topics are below.

Increased collaboration between teachers and teaching assistants

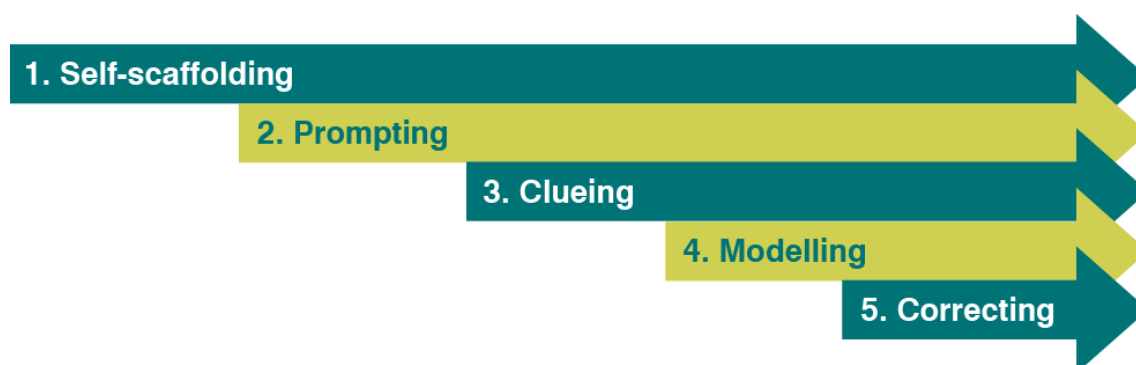
In line with the WPR model, studies on the optimal deployment of teaching assistants typically emphasise the importance of time for teachers to plan collaboratively with teaching assistants. Teachers are then able to work with the teaching assistant in determining and communicating an appropriate role for them during the lesson, and to establish associated mutual expectations, such as on guidance and supervision (Biggs et al., 2016; Gibson et al., 2016). Teachers require effective pre-planning and organisational skills, as well as detailed lesson plans and the ability to communicate relevant knowledge in their teaching assistant briefing meetings (Wallace et al., 2001). For the latter to occur, teaching assistants need to be resourced to attend meetings outside of their student contact hours. Teachers acknowledge the very real challenges of timetabling common non-contact time with a teaching assistant, especially when teaching assistant hours are typically fixed to the scheduled instructional hours (Webster et al., 2013).

Teachers retain responsibility for the progress and development of their students, irrespective of whether students receive support from teaching assistants (Davies & Henderson, 2020). Consequently, teachers need to work collaboratively with teaching assistants to best promote student learning. Further professional learning may be needed for teachers to feel confident to work effectively with teaching assistants, or when working with students with disability (Webster et al., 2020). Teachers also have a role in training the teaching assistant with whom they are working, including supporting teaching assistants to establish constructive relationships with students. Given the time pressures teachers already face, it is difficult to reconcile asking them to spend additional time collaborating with or training teaching assistants. Positively, however, a UK study reported most teachers felt the time they invested in preparing teaching assistants was offset by the resulting benefits and advantages of improved support from that teaching assistant (Webster et al., 2013).

Professional learning

As noted within the 'practice' component of the WPR model, teaching assistants have different skill sets to teachers. Professional learning targeted at improving teaching assistant practice is likely to improve outcomes for students, irrespective of whether the teaching assistants are supporting students with disability, delivering interventions or deployed more generally within the classroom. For example, providing teaching assistants with knowledge of scaffold-based models of support (Figure 13; Bosanquet et al., 2021 cited in EEF, 2021), such as using a modelling approach or employing prompting without providing answers, may enable them to support teachers and students (Light et al., 2014; Radford et al., 2015).

Figure 13. Scaffolding framework for teaching assistant-student interactions. Source: EEF (2021) based on Bosanquet, Radford & Webster (2021).



1. **Self-scaffolding:** Teaching assistants observe, giving students time for processing and thinking. Self-scaffolders can: plan how to approach a task, problem-solve as they go and review how they approached a task.
2. **Prompting:** Teaching assistants provide prompts when students are unable to self-scaffold. Prompts encourage students to draw on their own knowledge but refrain from specifying a strategy. The aim is to nudge students into deploying a self-scaffolding technique. For example: "What do you need to do first? What's your plan? You can do this!"
3. **Clueing:** Often students know the strategies or knowledge required to solve a problem but find it difficult to call them to mind. Clues worded as questions provide a hint in the right direction. The answer must contain a key piece of information to help students work out how to move forward. Always start with a small clue.
4. **Modelling:** Prompts and clues can be ineffective when students encounter a task that requires a new skill or strategy. Teaching assistants, as confident and competent experts, can model while students actively watch and listen. Students should try the same step for themselves immediately afterwards.
5. **Correcting:** This involves providing answers and requires no independent thinking. Occasionally it is appropriate to do this, however, teaching assistants should always aim instead to model and encourage students to apply new skills or knowledge first.

International research into professional learning for teaching assistants has previously reported that teaching assistants wish to develop skills to work with underlying issues in student behaviour, effective behaviour interventions, and learning how to implement new strategies in the classroom (Leslie, 2018). Appropriate professional learning is essential to enable teaching assistants to tutor students or implement interventions effectively (Alborz et al., 2009). Training in the specific intervention was a key feature common to all of the teaching assistant-led interventions found by EEF to have a positive impact (EEF, 2021). The research base suggests teaching assistants need to undertake professional learning not just on the specific intervention they are delivering (including the goals and research base), but also learn how to best deliver the intervention, and how to manage behaviour in the process (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2007; Sharples et al., 2021; Webster et al., 2011).

Professional learning to promote inclusion

Recommendations for adequate preparation of all staff involved in implementing inclusive education have been reiterated over time. For example, the first recommendation of the 2002 Australian Senate *Inquiry into Education of Students with Disabilities* stated that all teaching assistants working with students with disability should be qualified in special education (*Australian Senate Inquiry into Education of Students with Disabilities*, 2002). Approximately half of the teaching assistants working in inclusive education in mainstream and specialist settings in Australia hold a VET Certificate or Diploma in Education Support. Once employed by a school, learning opportunities for teaching assistants predominantly consist of experiential, on-the-job training (Strnadová et al., 2022). Teaching assistants have previously highlighted the importance of such learning to meet the needs of the students with disability; for example, learning from teachers, allied specialists, such as speech and language therapists, as well as other teaching assistants (Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015).

Professional learning is seen as a key means of ensuring teaching assistants have the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary to support high-quality education. There are three elements typical of teaching assistants' work with students with disability which should be key components of professional learning: supporting their learning, supporting their engagement with peers and supporting their physical care needs (Carter et al., 2015).

Teaching assistants require systematic training to provide appropriate support in each of these areas but, to date, most research has focused on how they can best support student learning. Such research has, for example, highlighted the need for teaching assistants to understand how to scaffold learning and to develop their prompting and questioning skills to help students build independence in learning and living (Bowles et al., 2018; Radford et al., 2015).

The above recommendations for improving the impact of teaching assistance on student outcomes, including the need for further professional learning and collaboration with teachers, have been reiterated by several authors over the last decade. It therefore seems logical to ask if these recommendations have improved how teaching assistants are deployed to support students.

Has published guidance improved support provided by teaching assistants?

There is surprisingly little research examining the effectiveness of applying published recommendations or guidance for improving teaching assistant deployment and student outcomes. Of that available, the most significant is a large-scale evaluation across 128 UK schools assessing the application of the *Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants* recommendations (derived from the DISS study) on improved outcomes for students with additional requirements for learning (Dimova et al., 2021). Half of the schools (the treatment schools) received training, resources and additional support to develop and implement a school improvement plan in accordance with the 7 recommendations during the first year. Implementation then extended into a second year to ensure the changes were fully embedded. In contrast, the 'control' schools had access to the publicly available recommendations and reports, but did not receive any additional training or support to implement these. After two years, several positive outcomes were observed in the treatment schools, including:

- student engagement increased
- lower attaining students and students with disability worked more independently
- teaching assistants spent less time working with individual students with disability or who were under-performing and more time team-teaching (Dimova et al., 2021).

Less positively, however, teachers in these schools also spent less time working with students performing below the standard expected or students with additional requirements for learning. This may indicate that teachers needed more time to respond and adapt to the changing roles (Dimova et al., 2021), or to improve their skills and confidence engaging with students with disability, potentially via professional learning.

No differences in student learning in reading or maths were observed between the treatment schools and control schools despite the shift in teaching assistant behaviour (Dimova et al., 2021). Logically, the lack of impact (with regard to reading or maths) could well be explained by teachers not spending additional time with these students, as had been expected once teaching assistants stepped back to enable such interactions. The potential hesitancy of teachers to work more closely with students with disability chimes with earlier Australian research, where school principals noted that some teachers *“feel underprepared to teach students with disabilities, particularly those with challenging behaviours and inappropriate social skills”* (Punch, 2015).

Another key finding was although some control schools tried to implement the guidance independently, this did not result in an observable shift in teaching assistant deployment (Dimova et al., 2021). This highlights the difficulty of achieving behavioural change and reinforces the need for schools to approach improvement in a systematic manner, preferably with additional support and resources to manage change. To support such an approach, the EEF provides a [range of resources](#) to help schools self-assess, develop their own vision and teaching assistant deployment policy, and implement evidence-based changes.



Image 1. An adult and a child sit cross-legged on a colourful classroom rug, reading together from a children's book titled *WeirDo* by Author Anh Do. The adult smiles as they hold the book open, while the child, wearing a blue polo shirt, listens attentively and follows along. Bookshelves filled with books line the background, creating a bright and welcoming classroom setting.

Closer to home, a South Australian Inclusive School Communities (ISC) project used a multi-faceted set of activities and resources to increase the capacity of 12 schools to operate inclusively between mid-2018 and mid-2020 (Jarvis et al., 2020). The project went beyond simply using teaching assistants as an adjustment, but still adds to the literature on teaching assistant deployment in Australia. On completion of the project, respondents indicated some improvements in their practice related to teaching assistant deployment regarding the following three points.

- Teaching assistants work in a variety of ways and with different groups of students, rather than always working one-on-one with a student with an identified disability or with the same small group.
- Teaching assistants are considered integral members of the teaching team.
- Teachers and teaching assistants have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in supporting students with disability in the classroom. This is reviewed regularly.

Few participants indicated these aspects were “fully in place” by the end of the project (Jarvis et al., 2020), reflecting the difficulties of achieving meaningful change to practice within a short period of time. Similarly, respondents indicated they were generally satisfied with the project, had learnt from it, and there were minor shifts in policy and practice, but implementation was typically quite limited. Again, this illustrates the difficulties in changing practices across a school.

These findings are typical of research on school-wide improvement, which indicates that multiple components are required to shift beliefs and behaviours, including a shared vision, strong leadership and a strong commitment to cultural change, as well as targeted, professional learning for all teachers that is relevant for their work (Jarvis et al., 2020; McMaster, 2013). Consequently, adopting a whole school approach is likely to be a key factor in achieving more optimal deployment of teaching assistants in Australian classrooms and thus improving outcomes for students with additional learning and accessibility requirements.

For further practical strategies, see AITSL’s *[Guidelines for the Optimal Deployment of Teaching Assistants in Australian Classrooms](#)*, which outline 7 practical, evidence-informed strategies schools can consider.

Conclusions

Teaching assistants are increasingly common in classrooms today, with positive effects seen where the teaching assistants implement evidence-based interventions, such as for literacy or behaviour management. International research indicates that teaching assistants working intensively with individual students can impede the development of those students, as this can reduce both student autonomy and the interactions of these students with their teacher and peers.

Over the last few decades, there has been an increasing reliance on teaching assistants to support students with disability. Teaching assistants are now the most common adjustments for students with disability globally and are vital in promoting access to education for many students. It is important that both teaching assistants and the teachers they work with are aware of potential pitfalls, including teachers delegating instructional responsibilities (including adapting class materials for specific students) to teaching assistants or spending less time with students supported by teaching assistants. Both teaching assistants and teachers may benefit from additional professional learning.

Staged approaches targeted to reducing reliance on support for students with disabilities will promote the sustainability of support. Consequently, school-wide improvement plans focusing on improving both the deployment and practice of teaching assistants and teachers alike are recommended. Ideally, these would be led by school leaders with all staff involved in the process.

Footnotes

1. This Spotlight uses the social model of disability, which recognises that the physical, cultural (including attitudinal) and communication barriers can preclude people living with long-term health conditions from participating in society on an equitable basis as people without long-term health conditions.

2. In Australia, the term 'adjustments' refers to any "changes to curriculum (what is taught), instruction (how it is taught) and general support (e.g., behaviour management, environmental changes, personal or medical care) used to facilitate the learning of students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms" (Carter et al., 2022). These adjustments are intended to remove barriers to learning and engagement and typically provide students with additional support, both within their classrooms and school activities more broadly (Department of Education and Training, 2015).
3. Whilst the terminology may differ between Australian states and education systems, this Spotlight defines:
 - 'special schools' as schools which provide education programs designed specifically for students with disability; and
 - 'special assistance schools' as those which primarily cater to students with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties while 'specialised settings' encompasses both of these school types.
4. Randomised controlled trials (RCT) are robust trials "that measure the effectiveness of a new intervention or treatment. Randomization [sic] reduces bias and provides a rigorous tool to examine cause-effect relationships between an intervention and outcome" (Hariton & Locascio, 2018). As such, RCT are often considered the 'gold standard' of research trials.
5. The Education Endowment Foundation measures student progress as equivalent to the progress expected against a baseline school year. 5 months progress indicates that students who participated in the interventions increased their learning by the equivalent of 5 months (even if the interventions were shorter than this) (EEF. 2022)

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