

FROM COVID TO THE COST OF LIVING

The crises remaking the role of teaching assistants



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In order to protect individuals and individuals' circumstances, we have ensured that schools and participants cannot be identified in the presentation of our findings. That said, in a report designed to recognise good practice in terms of what schools do to support their teaching assistants (TAs) and to recognise their contribution and value, it feels appropriate to acknowledge the schools that took part in our case studies.

The interviews we conducted with TAs, teachers and school leaders brought home the exceptional effort and commitment that schools make to promoting and nurturing their TA workforce. We thank them for their time, their candidness, and their ideas. They are:

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¹ www.port.ac.uk/eric

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Executive summary

This report presents findings from a study that followed on from a large-scale survey of teaching assistants' (TAs) experiences of working during Covid. The study aimed to document the role of TAs during the so-called 'recovery' year (2021/22), and to identify examples of what good schools do to recognise, value, incentivise and ultimately retain their TAs. We obtained data from 22 semi-structured interviews with TAs, teachers and headteachers from five primary schools in England.

Key findings

1. The pandemic has remade the role of the TA – potentially forever. The role is now more varied, with informal duties that TAs took on during the lockdown phase persisting into the recovery phase. TAs described their job as 'more intense' than before. Supporting pupils' pastoral and wellbeing needs, delivering more curriculum interventions to those who had fallen behind, backfilling for specialist staff (e.g. speech and language therapists) and supporting parents and carers had led to marked increases in TAs' workload and their emotional load pre-pandemic.
2. The study was conducted during a prevailing crisis over the rising cost of living, which was clearly impacting schools and TAs, and was predicted to worsen. Headteachers feared losing TAs to relatively better-paid jobs and being unable to recruit to TA vacancies, as TAs themselves struggled to make ends meet.
3. While there were limited actions schools could take on raising their pay, we found that they had creative ways of recognising and rewarding TAs. Gestures such as 'wellbeing days' contribute to retention strategies, but TAs reported that the most effective actions that schools took to incentivise them to stay in post were including them in the school community and school processes, such as lesson planning, and investing in and supporting their development as classroom professionals.

Key recommendations

1. While there are useful actions schools can take to retain TAs, the cost of living crisis means that their chronic low pay presents an urgent threat to TAs' livelihoods and to schools. The government must provide sufficient financial support so that TAs can meet rising costs and schools can retain their TAs. Failure to do so is likely to have serious implications for maintaining SEND provision and teacher workload and retention.
2. The government should introduce a comprehensive package of investment in the TA workforce. This includes improvements to pay, the development of and funding for pathways to upskill TAs, and more resourcing to support the wellbeing of all school staff.

Introduction

The distinctive contribution teaching assistants (TAs)² make to the day-to-day running of schools often goes under-reported and unacknowledged. Previous research for UNISON, published in a report called, *Unsung Heroes: The role of teaching assistants and classroom assistants in keeping schools functioning during lockdown*, revealed the hidden work and hidden value of TAs to schools during the periods of lockdown in the first 12 months of the Covid pandemic in the UK.^{3,4} Based on a survey of 9,055 UK TAs, conducted during the winter 2021 lockdown, the report concluded that it was hard to see how schools could have managed the Covid crisis without TAs.

Another UNISON survey of 4,304 TAs, carried out in November 2021⁵, found that their sense of feeling valued by their school is concerningly low. Just over half of TAs (51%) reported that they did not feel valued as a member of staff; the other 49%, however, did. This result suggests that while many schools do recognise and appreciate the contributions their TAs make to school life, many others do not. Equally concerning was the finding that 96% of TAs said that they were concerned their rate of pay was insufficient to meeting the rising cost of living. It is a reminder that as the disruption from Covid recedes, the exacerbation of the existing problem of low pay for TAs and the serious implications this has for their livelihoods, as well as for the schools in which they work, has been exposed by the cost of living crisis.

This report presents findings from a follow-up study, conducted one year on from the *Unsung Heroes* report. The study had two aims. Firstly, to document the role and contribution TAs have made over the 2021/22 school year, in terms of supporting schools' 'recovery' strategies, bringing to light what has remained largely hidden from public view. Secondly, to identify examples of the actions schools take to recognise and incentivise their TAs, and which contribute to their formal and informal retention strategies.

This study triangulates qualitative data from the perspectives of TAs, headteachers and teachers within the same schools, and provides a more detailed picture of the situation on the ground described via the earlier survey studies.

This report begins with a summary of the role TAs played during the pandemic, based on a UK wide survey of TAs in 2021 survey. This provides the baseline for the current study. We

² This report uses the term teaching assistants (TAs) to refer to school staff in pupil-based and classroom-based support roles. This definition includes other commonly used role titles, such as classroom assistant, learning support assistant, and special needs assistant.

³ The UNISON-funded project, [The Role of Teaching and Classroom Assistants during the COVID-19 Crisis](#), was based at the International Literacy Centre (ILC), UCL Institute of Education, and led by Professor Gemma Moss with Alice Bradbury, Sinéad Harmey and Rob Webster (formerly UCL Centre for Inclusive Education).

⁴ Moss, G., Webster, R., Harmey, S. & Bradbury, A. (2021) *Unsung Heroes: The role of teaching assistants and classroom assistants in keeping schools functioning during lockdown*. London: UCL Institute of Education

⁵ <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/press-release/2021/11/schools-risk-support-staff-exodus-over-pay-warns-unison/>

then set out the methods adopted in this research before turning to the key findings. These include TAs' reflections on how their roles have changed during the pandemic, how schools and TAs are managing now, and the impact the cost of living crisis is having on TAs personally and the schools they work in. We provide recommendations for policymakers and school leaders on how to maximise TA retention at a time when schools and many TAs face mounting financial difficulty.

Background: The *Unsung Heroes* survey and report

During the early part of 2021, schools in the UK once again found themselves in lockdown, providing education to children on site and at home. *Unsung Heroes*, published in April 2021, revealed how vital TAs were to schools' responses to dealing with these challenging circumstances. TAs were deployed to cover staff absences, enabling schools to stay open to vulnerable and keyworker children. Within schools, TAs managed whole classes and class bubbles on their own, as well as continuing to offer targeted support to individual pupils (including delivering targeted interventions) and teaching small groups. Perhaps not surprisingly, being on the frontline left TAs feeling vulnerable, and the risks of exposure to Covid played on their minds. It was not lost on them that, as one observed, the '*lowest paid TAs are in school doing the dangerous face-to-face work*'.

Out in the community, TAs undertook a range of additional tasks, including providing direct support to families, often from the doorstep. They delivered learning packs to enable children to carry on learning at home and provided 'troubleshooting' support to those having difficulties accessing online lessons. TAs also delivered food parcels to families in need.

As the report's title made clear, TAs were, in many ways, the unsung heroes of the pandemic. Yet, despite this, only a quarter (27%) of TAs considered that their own school had become more aware of their role in supporting pupils and families.

TAs are essential to the day-to-day running of schools, even in more normal times. Given the substantial effort TAs made during the height of the pandemic and the feelings expressed in the survey that their role was little understood and appreciated, it seemed important to revisit this topic now that schools are open (although they are still affected by Covid). Given the evidence from the UNISON survey about TAs' concerns about their pay, the cost of living crisis seemed to be an important additional context for investigating schools' deployment strategies and their formal and informal approaches to retaining TAs.

Research procedure and sample

The study reported here used a case study design to obtain rich, qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews with TAs, teachers, and school leaders in a small number of schools. It used an opportunistic sample. Schools were recruited via a preliminary expression of interest (EOI) approach addressed to the headteachers of mainstream schools in England and shared via professional networks and on social media. The electronic EOI form collected general, non-sensitive quantitative data on each school's context. These data were used to assist the shortlisting and selection of schools, and to ensure that the sample included schools with a range of characteristics. These criteria included: region; size of pupil roll; number of TAs on staff; and the severity of disruption from Covid over autumn 2021.

Five primary settings were selected for case study treatment, reflecting the facts that the vast majority of TAs employed in mainstream schools work in these settings, and their over-representation in the aforementioned survey studies.

Our first round of interviews was with the headteachers and lasted about an hour. We used these interviews to obtain further contextual information about each school and its community, which is summarised and presented anonymously in Box 1 (see below). We also used the headteacher interviews to explain the process of recruiting TAs and teachers for the second round of interviews. While we targeted interviews with two TAs and two teachers per school, this was moderated depending on the size of the school (e.g. one TA and one teacher were targeted for the smallest school; four TAs and three teachers were targeted for the largest school). Staff interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 45 minutes in duration. All interviews were conducted remotely by Zoom.

A total of 22 interviews were conducted with five headteachers, one deputy headteacher, 10 TAs, and seven teachers. Staff interviews were arranged at the convenience of the school and the individuals. However, as is often inevitable and excusable with research with schools, unplanned events (e.g. covering for a staff absence) meant that some scheduled interviews with TAs and teachers were missed. While most were rearranged, there were a few that could not be rescheduled. Therefore, in some cases, the overall number of planned interviews in some schools fell slightly short of our target.

Each interviewee was asked an inflection on that same broad set of questions, which can be seen in Appendix 1. The questions were clustered into four themes: 1) the role of TAs during the pandemic (over 2020/21); 2) the role of TAs (so far) during what has been coined the 'recovery' or 'rebuilding' phase (2021/22); and 3) how the school demonstrates that it recognises and values the work of TAs. The fourth theme was interviewees' practical

recommendations to school leaders and policymakers on what schools and the government could do to recognise and incentivise TAs. The interview schedule was sufficiently flexible and broad-based to reflect a range of experiences and perspectives, and to allow other salient themes and details to emerge.

The interviews were transcribed using the Zoom transcription facility, then checked and amended for accuracy against the original audio recording. The data were analysed thematically, using the framework provided by the interview schedule. The findings, which follow, are illustrated using indicative verbatim comments from the interviews.

Box 1. Brief description of case study schools and their context⁶

School A is a large school of over 600 pupils. Two year groups have six classes. Over 90% of the pupil population are white British. The proportion of children eligible for the Pupil Premium is 25% (which is the national average). The proportion of children on the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) register is 15% (again, in line with the national average). Nineteen pupils have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). The school employs 32 TAs.

School B is a two-form entry of around 400 pupils. It is situated on a large housing estate, where many families experience high levels of deprivation. The school and local community is very ethnically diverse, with over 30 different languages spoken. The staff team reflects this diversity. Eighteen pupils have an EHCP. The school employs around 30 TAs and other pupil support staff.

School C is a large, three-form entry school of around 600 pupils. The school serves a community where many parents and carers are employed as keyworkers. Between 11% and 15% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. The school employs 26 TAs.

School D is a one-form entry school, with 79 children on roll. Just under half of pupils (48%) are eligible for the Pupil Premium. The school employs seven TAs.

School E is a large school of around 400 pupils in an area experiencing a significant growth in its population. There are three classes in Years 5 and 6, and five classes in each year below. The school population is majority non-white, and about 10% are of Romany Gypsy heritage. Between 41% and 45% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. The school employs 14 TAs.

⁶ These narrative descriptions are based on the contextual detail obtained via the interviews with headteachers.

Findings

1. The role of teaching assistants during the pandemic (2020/21)

The interviews conducted for this study build on the numerical results of the 2021 survey, which showed how TAs provided a blend of in-school and at-home support with teaching and learning alongside, and sometimes in place of, teachers. The interview data offered deeper insight into exactly what TAs did during the periods of lockdown (when schools were partially open), and the impact that it had.

Supporting children

The interviewees conjured some vivid pictures of what lockdown support looked like, on and off site. Some TAs read with children and played games via Zoom (e.g. counting objects around the home). TAs made duplicates of resources, so that they could interact with children remotely. As one TA explained: *“They had the real one and we had a copy, so that we could play games online”*. One headteacher described how a TA went to the homes of parents and carers who *“were struggling with their laptops. She used to meet them outside in the garden and help them access remote learning”*.

Throughout the early stages of the pandemic, TAs continued to run their usual literacy and maths interventions with pupils online, ensuring that basic skills were maintained, and provided individualised support to those with additional needs.

Within school, there was a sense that TAs who led small groups and classes recognised the need to keep the curriculum content lighter during the early and anxious stages of the pandemic. They made learning fun and took it outdoors wherever possible; one TA, for example, organised bug hunts. TAs were sensitive to the novel situation in which everybody found themselves and knew the importance of prioritising pastoral and emotional support.

“There were children, 7 to 8 years old, who didn't know what Covid was [and asking] ‘Why are our family members suddenly going into hospital and not coming back?’ It was a tough time. It wasn't just about reading. It wasn't just about education. It was about sharing their feelings, sharing their tears.” (TA)

Supporting families

What came through strongly in almost every interview was that this emotional support extended to parents and carers – and how essential this was to families.

"We had to be there, not just for other children, but the whole family... We made sure we rang everybody... [Parents] needed someone to talk to. So we spent five to seven, eight minutes talking to parents. 'How are you? What could we do for you?'... We had mothers. They were just crying on the phone. They were saying: 'We don't know what's happened. We need to get out. We need to talk to somebody'. We were saying: 'We are here'." (TA)

TAs delivered food parcels, and in one case, worked in the kitchen to cover for catering staff. One school set up a food bank and a clothing bank for families facing financial difficulty. In a couple of cases, TAs provided support to families who needed to apply for financial support – some of whom were new to the UK.

"I was doing lots of applications... applications for benefits, child benefits... for parents not being able to read and write in any language. They were relying on children. Children are able to speak [English], but sometimes it's hard for a child, who is 8 or 9 years old, to fill in a form which is twenty-something pages." (TA)

There was a sense, especially among TAs, that the pandemic had produced conditions that were precipitating a fundamental change to their role and their understanding of it (more on this below). One teacher described TAs as 'social workers'. One TA remarked: *"At that time, were we TAs? Helpers? Were we keyworkers? I don't know. Who were we?"*

Headteachers and teachers were genuine in their effusiveness about the impact of TAs over Covid. The following comments are indicative of their appreciation of TAs' contributions and the difference it made during the first 12 months of the pandemic.

"I don't know how we would have survived without them. They were totally invaluable to what we were able to offer to our school community. We serve a very vulnerable school community, and so we needed as many children as possible to come to school, because some of them live in such severe overcrowded conditions that they would never be able to receive any education at home... So our support staff were tremendous during that period." (Headteacher)

"[TAs] would have had, like everybody else, their own family stresses during that time, and things going on at home. But to still come to work every day and keep going... They did an amazing job with those longer hours and more responsibility... They went over and above to keep the school running... [We] wouldn't have been able to keep going [without them]. There's no question about that." (Teacher)

2. The role of teaching assistants during the ‘recovery’ phase (2021/22)

The 2021/22 academic year was the first ‘lockdown free’ year since 2018/19. September 2021 marked the start of the so-called ‘recovery’ phase: the effort to make up for time ‘lost’ to the pandemic. The interview data provided evidence that TAs’ roles had changed over the course of the pandemic and revealed the particular impact this had on them.

A greater intensity and variation in TA roles

The role was described by many interviewees as ‘more intense’ – not just compared with 2020/21, but more intense than ever before. A key reason for this was how TAs were delivering interventions more often and to more children than previously and supporting a greater number of children with pastoral and wellbeing needs.

"In Year 3, TAs had to run more interventions... instead of running two [phonics] interventions, they were running four interventions across the morning to cope with the demand." (Headteacher)

Some of the additional activities TAs took on during Covid had carried over into the ‘recovery’ year. TAs were backfilling for SEND specialists, mainly speech and language therapists, who were unable to provide in-school support. Whereas Covid restrictions had previously prevented this, it appeared that an overall rise in pupil need and demand for specialist practitioners had caused shortages locally.

For several TAs, the family support function that they adopted during lockdown persisted to varying degrees once children were back at school full-time. In one school, TAs were running toilet training workshops. Elsewhere, another TA described how parents and carers kept approaching them with their ‘health problems’ and ‘financial problems’. In many cases, Covid appeared to have marked a profound shift in the composition and purpose of the TA role.

"We did everything we could. Our role from 2020 to this day... has changed. It's properly changed, and I think it's going to continue." (TA)

"The role has massively changed, massively changed... I remember two parents who I was speaking to asked, 'what's the TA's job? Oh, are they just helpers?' I thought, Oh my God, helpers?! No. It's changed." (TA)

For many TAs, the greater role intensity and variation had led to an increase in their workload. They believed this would persist as schools continued to identify and address gaps in children’s learning.

"Oh yeah, definitely... to this day [spring 2022], we're still trying to fit more into the day in order to help with what some of the children have missed out on. And I think it's going to be like that for a while... Definitely into the next year." (TA)

The emotional impact on TAs

Interviewees reported that the pandemic has had an emotional impact on TAs, and which in some respects may be slightly different to the emotional impact it has had on teachers and school leaders. There was a strong sense of maintaining high levels of professionalism during what has been a turbulent and worrisome period.

"I left my tears behind. I cried in the car because of the loss of [a family member]. But when I walked in [to school], you know what, I had my head up. I had a smile." (TA)

"The outward pressures of not knowing what was going on, and obviously from your own health perspective, you were worried about mixing with keyworker children whose parents potentially are... more likely to pick Covid up." (TA)

"Truthfully, I think it's quite wearing actually... It must be quite draining... I think there'll probably be a level of fatigue [because of] that constant level of adaptability and flexibility and working in school." (Teacher)

"[TAs] put their lives on the line... sometimes the teachers were at home, and we had the support staff in every day... Obviously, some of them were really concerned. Especially at first, when we didn't know what this thing [Covid] was... At some points, they were fearful for themselves and their families, like everybody, and so you would obviously get some of that... their worry and concerns. But that didn't stop them from still coming in... day in, day out." (Headteacher)

A particular source of frustration and anxiety that fed into TAs' descriptions of the emotional toll of Covid was their lack of experience and preparation for dealing with atypical situations beyond their comfort zone. While it was the case that almost all school staff were underprepared for working during a pandemic, the evidence from those we interviewed suggested that it was TAs rather than teachers that found themselves more commonly in stressful frontline situations, especially with parents and carers. The comment below was indicative of not only the anxiety TAs felt over this, but also how this pushed at the boundaries of their role.

"I don't have the training to be a counsellor for parents... or be a social worker... I have no idea what to do." (TA)

In lieu of training to prepare TAs for these fresh responsibilities (which, given Covid, was not always practical), some schools provided supervision to TAs undertaking emotionally-demanding work. Two TAs described asking their school for help and had received some counselling sessions. Another TA, meanwhile, felt that reciprocal, informal support of the kind they were providing to parents and carers was in short supply for school staff.

"You have been so strong for everybody else. The children, your family, your parents, your siblings. Who's there for you?... If only somebody ever said: 'Come to us and speak to us for ten minutes, just the way you speak to those parents'." (TA)

3. The impact of the cost of living crisis

As the recovery year continued, a new crisis began to make its presence felt in schools regarding the rising cost of living. These growing concerns came through strongly in the interviews we conducted with TAs and headteachers. For headteachers, there was a sense of a looming employment crisis, while for TAs, the issues were more personal, as it was clear that many of them were struggling to make ends meet.

Urgent need to improve pay

Low pay for TAs is a longstanding issue, but with the cost of living crisis dominant in the minds of so many people we spoke to, the calls we heard for increased pay sounded more urgent than ever. TAs' salaries were described as less competitive than ever before, and some interviewees mentioned the high cost of fuel as a particular stressor on personal finances. There were reports of TAs being unable to afford to drive to work each day.

"It's becoming increasingly difficult for TAs to survive, to work, because the pay is so low. I don't want to say the obvious, but the pay is terrible." (Headteacher)

"Everyone who's come to speak to me ends up in tears... They just find the travel really difficult, because it's an hour each way [and] it's very expensive." (Headteacher)

One school served families from a housing development that provided affordable homes for keyworkers, some of whom worked at the school in support roles. The headteacher described the acute financial difficulties some TAs were facing and had wanted to give them small donations to help with their energy bills at home; however, they recognised that this would be hard to justify given governance guidelines and – with the school also facing higher energy bills – restrictions on its budget.

Many TAs emphasised their strong commitment to improving the lives of children, often the most vulnerable, is what kept them in post – not the level of pay.

"It's never, never been about the money. I definitely wouldn't be doing this for the money." (TA)

Nevertheless, TAs were worried about the future, and whether the government might intervene with financial help. They were uncertain that the government understood the reality they faced. Some interviewees thought that the only way the situation would change was if policymakers understood the real difficulties that TAs faced.

"I would like [the education secretary] to do the role and then justify not giving them more money." (Teacher)

Recruiting and retaining TAs

It was evident that the turbulence from Covid had abated. Staffing levels, though still affected by illness, had recovered somewhat since the height of the pandemic. Yet now, schools were facing a new emergency over TA recruitment and retention, accelerated by the cost of living crisis. Headteachers predicted the situation would intensify in the 2022/23 academic year, and they reported that some TAs were contemplating their future at the school.

"I can't hide from the fact that because the pay is so bad in schools at the moment, because the cost of living is rising... It's becoming increasingly difficult to recruit TAs." (Headteacher)

"We've had a rolling advert for teaching assistants now since January, and we found one person. We need eight." (Headteacher)

"Basically, I think we will start haemorrhaging TAs. Not only here, but in other places, because you can get paid more money in the supermarket." (Headteacher)

The effect of the rising cost of living outpacing pay was a particular issue for younger TAs, who, as one headteacher described, could not conceive of it as the kind of career that can provide the type of salary that supports a good life.

"They don't see it as a career. It's like it was a job while they were between 20 and 23. It's a good stepping-stone... but it's not going to be a career option, because it doesn't earn enough money to be able to get married, buy a house, have a child, all those other things that people are looking forward to." (Headteacher)

Regardless of their passion and commitment to the role, younger TAs were increasingly feeling that the pay situation, unless it improved, would be the decisive factor driving them out of their role. TAs also described the potential knock-on effects in terms of recruitment, fearing that fewer people would be attracted to the role.

"I do think this industry is going to have a problem keeping TAs... because of the wages. I'm thinking of changing and just doing anything that can bring in some more income." (TA)

"My partner is going to start doing her teacher training, so we're about to lose half of our income. I've just had to be really upfront with my line manager and just say, 'I'm not sure if I'm going to be here next year, because this job doesn't [pay enough]. Like, really, I'd love to stay, but the money's just not good enough.'" (TA)

"For people like me and my partner and other people in the staffroom who are starting out their careers, I would really hate for someone to be put off by the dreadful wage and I'm sure that is happening, and it may well happen to me." (TA)

4. Recognising and incentivising teaching assistants

A key aim of the study was to identify the actions, other than pay, that good schools take to recognise their TAs and their contributions, and to demonstrate that they are valued members of their community. As the work of TAs is often hidden, actively recognising and even celebrating what they do is important for morale, but it can also form part of a school's approach to retaining TAs. While there were limitations to raising TAs' pay, our study found that the actions schools did take to recognise and incentivise TAs were very much connected to treating them as professionals.

Including TAs in school life and processes

It was striking that a significant part of what schools did to recognise and respect TAs was to include them in everyday processes, like lesson planning, and work hard to maintain strong professional relationships.

"When I plan, I don't just plan myself. I ask my TAs, 'what do you think we should do? What activities? Do you think this has gone well?'... I think it's really important to involve them in that because then they feel part of the setting." (Teacher)

"We have three really simple values, and I genuinely think we live them. Our first one is relationships... If you haven't got relationships that enable people to flourish, or to problem-solve... then you're stuffed." (Headteacher)

A notable feature of schools that prioritised the inclusion of TAs in school life was a culture of openness. TAs could express their opinions or voice concerns and feel that they were heard.

"Some of the schools I've been in, the TAs have kind of been dismissed. We're really just as valued as the teachers and it comes across... Our opinions are taken into account." (TA)

"If you've got a problem you could go to somebody and say, 'this isn't working', or 'can you help me out with this?' And I don't think that's met with any resistance." (TA)

Where schools ensured that TAs were fully included, there was a strong sense of cohesion and community, and of TAs being aware that what they do makes a difference to the lives of children and families.

"We go over and above all the time for our school community, and that includes support staff, so they are a part of that. They're part of that journey with us." (Headteacher)

"I live close to school, so I see that the children that I've taught, I've been working with, grown up. That is very inspiring for me. I just love it." (TA)

Investing in upskilling TAs

Another expression of the professional esteem in which TAs were held by teachers and senior leaders was how the school invested in upskilling their TAs. Schools provided professional development opportunities via formal training and on-the-job experiences. One headteacher described a rigorous induction programme for new TAs, which gave them the skills they needed to do the job effectively. TAs reported that the provision of and access to training and learning provided intrinsic motivation and momentum for building their repertoire of skills and furthering their development as classroom professionals. One school used the early days of the first lockdown (spring 2020) to allow TAs time to immerse themselves in online professional learning, which it seemed had created an appetite for more opportunities.

"We've added more professional development, because we saw that there was real, real enthusiasm and emails that were sent to me saying, 'I've been so inspired during this course. It was very tricky. I was scared doing it, but now I've got through it'."

(Headteacher)

Some TAs in some schools were being supported by their school to achieve GCSE qualifications. This demonstrated a clear personal investment in TAs that, it might be argued, was over and above the kind of role specific training schools might ordinarily provide for TAs. Relatedly, some schools encouraged and supported their TAs to apply for teacher training.

"We're buying in a maths secondary teacher to come in on Thursday for those that want to do Maths GCSE. We will train them here." (Headteacher)

"All the senior leadership team... were all so invested in me applying for [teacher training]. They were like, 'let me help with your application'. Loads of them did references for me, and they were really keen to have me [train here]. So, they just made me feel really valued." (TA)

"[SENCO] said to me the other day, 'your relationships with the kids are so fantastic. I can't wait to see what you're going to do as a teacher'. It's just that constant positive reinforcement, which is obviously good for anyone, isn't it?" (TA)

Schools also supported TAs to gain experience and build skills in the context of their everyday classroom role. For example, schools provided opportunities for TAs who had ambitions to train as a teacher to do some elements of instruction or lesson delivery.

"We try to listen to them and try and see how we can support them with their ambitions... All of those things are going to help us as well, and help with their job, and also make them happy, because they feel that they're being supported, and that they're being listened to." (Headteacher)

Other actions

Despite wanting to improve TAs' pay, there was limited action headteachers could take on this. We did, however, find evidence of schools being mindful of not trading on TAs' goodwill or status and respecting and valuing their time and commitment by improving their hourly rate or extending their paid working hours for undertaking class cover or to meet with teachers for planning and feedback outside the school day. Again, this can be seen as part of schools' efforts to treat TAs as professionals who have a valuable contribution to make informing and delivering lessons.

"They get paid at the HLTA [higher level TA] rate when they [teach whole classes]. They're not getting paid at their [usual] rate when we use them to cover whole classes. We pay them at the higher rate." (Headteacher)

"A lot of our TAs come and do that off their own back [unpaid]... have a conversation with the teacher about what the learning's about... So, from September, we're recognising that and actually paying our TAs... to debrief with the teacher." (Headteacher)

Finally, schools had creative ways of expressing thanks to TAs, including one-off or annual special gestures and 'wellbeing days'.

"We do a special breakfast... It is like a five-star hotel breakfast." (Headteacher)

"We have a wellbeing day every year... it's a training day, but there are different things you can do. You can do African drumming. You can do dance. You can do yoga... Everybody can have a half an hour little treatment... you can get your nails done, or you can have a massage... Now it's only once a year, but... everybody really, really looks forward to that." (Headteacher)

"Wellbeing day [a paid day off] is valued... as a way to acknowledge [TAs]. In November, when it's dark and miserable, having a long weekend. That does benefit the health of people." (Headteacher)

While TAs appreciated these acts, it was the efforts schools made every day to ensure that they were included in and could meaningfully contribute to the functioning of the school that resulted in them feeling respected and valued, and ultimately kept them in post – and in some cases, working towards a progression into teaching.

Conclusions and recommendations

This report has presented findings from a follow-up study, conducted one year on from the *Unsung Heroes* report. The study had two aims. Firstly, to document the role and contribution TAs have made over the 2021/22 school year, in terms of supporting schools' 'recovery' strategies, bringing to light what has remained largely hidden from public view. Secondly, to identify examples of actions schools take to recognise and incentivise their TAs, and which contribute to their formal and informal retention strategies.

We obtained data from 22 semi-structured interviews with TAs, teachers and headteachers from five primary schools in England who volunteered to take part in the study. The opportunistic and small scale nature of our study means that it has limitations. That said, it is widely known that all schools have been operating in the same broad context, with respect to Covid and the cost of living crisis. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that our findings are likely to be replicated in, and resonate with, many UK schools.

Here, we summarise four overarching findings, discuss their implications, and provide three recommendations for the new government and one recommendation for schools (in bold).

1. The pandemic has changed the role of the TA – possibly forever

The view across the schools in our study was that the Covid period has remade the TA role, and that these changes are likely to be long-lasting. Over the course of the last two-and-a-half years, the TA role has become more varied, with additional duties taken on during the lockdown phases (2020/21) – notably support for parents and carers – persisting into the following academic year. TAs described their job as 'more intense' and emotionally-demanding than before. They were delivering more curriculum interventions, as so many pupils had fallen behind due to the pandemic disruption, supporting their pastoral needs, plus they were backfilling for specialist staff who worked with pupils with SEND (e.g. speech and language therapists). Consequently, TAs reported a marked increase in their workload.

This study, and the preceding 2021 survey, offer an indicative, but partial insight into the changing role of the TA, and its impact on schools and TAs themselves. Elements of this research is limited in terms of its scale and representativeness of schools and TAs. More evidence is needed on which to inform policies and action involving and affecting TAs.

We recommend that the new government commissions a large-scale survey of schools to fully investigate the extent of the changes to the TA role, the impact of the pandemic and the rising cost of living on the recruitment and retention of TAs and teachers, and to learn lessons about what is now needed for TAs to thrive in their role.

2. There is a clear and urgent case for the government investing in TAs to avoid the cost of living crisis triggering a wider recruitment and retention crisis in schools

TAs are highly motivated by the work they do and the difference they make to children's lives.⁷ While TAs said that money was not a factor in their reasons for doing the job, the consensus across the interviews was that the low pay associated with the role – now exposed and exacerbated by the cost of living crisis – poses an urgent threat to individuals' livelihoods and to schools.

TAs who were struggling to make ends meet were considering leaving for a relatively better-paid job elsewhere. Headteachers not only feared a potential exodus of TAs from schools, but that they would be unable to recruit to TA vacancies. Interviewees called for the government to urgently intervene at the national level, and to provide more funding to employers, so that they can improve pay to enable TAs to stay in post and meet rising living costs. The government needs to increase school funding to enable fair and competitive pay, via both national pay awards and local job evaluation. Failure to do so is likely to have serious implications for maintaining SEND provision and trigger a wider teacher workload and retention crisis. UNISON is campaigning on these issues for the whole school support staff team.

The government must urgently consider appeals for a fair pay increase for TAs⁸ – not just to enable TAs to meet the rising cost of living, but also to ensure pupils with SEND continue to be included and supported in mainstream classrooms, and to avert a bigger and costlier problems for schools and their local communities.

3. A national strategy for TAs

Many TAs have had to develop a broader range of skills to deal with the issues that the pandemic has created for pupils and families. Many TAs are now facing financial pressure and thinking of leaving their jobs. The sector needs to avoid any such 'talent drain', not just because, in the on-ongoing Covid recovery efforts, schools are in urgent need of staff with these skills; but also, because this loss would expose teachers to significant additional workload and stress, which would doubtless exacerbate the workforce retention crisis. Tackling a potentially disastrous TA retention crisis needs to be a priority for the new government.

⁷ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/teaching-assistant-interventions>

⁸ <https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/news/teaching-assistants-demand-minimum-2-000-pay-rise-unison-gmb-unite-support-staff-schools-education-national-agreement-on-pay-and-conditions-of-service-green-book/>

Alongside improvements to TAs' pay, the government should introduce a comprehensive package of investment in the TA workforce. This national strategy for TAs should include:

i. *Increase funding and pathways for upskilling TAs*

Our study showed that there is high demand for professional development among TAs. We have no reason not to think that across the country, there are TAs hungry to improve their skills and, for those that want it, to aid their progression into teaching. The government should tap into the potential teaching talent within the TA workforce by developing a route into teaching designed specifically for TAs, and which recognises, values and builds on their skills, knowledge and classroom experience. One way of levelling up the TA role could be for the Department for Education to meet with stakeholders to review existing national qualifications for TAs and to explore new ones, including for higher level teaching assistants, that reflects TAs' changed role.

ii. *More support for staff wellbeing*

Our study found that TAs were still processing the emotional effects of working on the frontline during Covid, alongside adjusting to a 'new normal' of a more intense and varied role. Teachers, leaders and other school support staff have been similarly affected by the pandemic, which is why our call for more funding extends to ensuring that schools have the resources to provide wellbeing support for all their staff.

4. Treating TAs as part of a community of professionals may be an effective way of encouraging them to stay in post as the cost of living crisis continues

TAs 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.⁹ Headteachers and teachers in our study were mindful of, and very grateful for, the considerable contribution TAs make to the effective functioning of their schools – not just during Covid, but in normal times.

This study went in search of evidence of the actions schools take to recognise and incentivise their TAs, which in the face of a potential retention crisis, could make a difference to some TAs in some schools staying in post. We found schools had creative ways of recognising and rewarding TAs, such as 'wellbeing days', which helped staff morale and

⁹ Webster, R. Bosanquet, P., Franklin, S. & Parker, M. (2021) *Maximising the impact of teaching assistants in primary schools: Guidance for school leaders*. Oxon: Routledge

contributed to their retention strategies. Yet TAs reported that the most effective actions schools took to incentivise them to stay in post were including them in the school community and everyday processes (e.g. lesson planning) and investing in and supporting their development as classroom professionals.

Our recommendation to school leaders is that while ‘feelgood’ gestures have a part to play in boosting morale, fully including TAs in school processes and investing in their development and status as professionals may be a more cost-effective and sustainable way to retain TAs.

Appendix 1: Interview schedules

Headteacher interview schedule

1. School context

- Tell me about your school: the size of the school; the number of classes; the number of staff; demographics of the community

2. During the pandemic

- How did Covid affect the ways in which TAs were deployed within your school?
 - *Prompts: What roles did they take on? What impact did this have on pupils, teachers, and the school generally? How did roles differ from before the pandemic?*

3. Covid recovery

- From the beginning of this academic year (Sept 2021) to now, how have TAs been involved in Covid-recovery efforts within your school?
 - *Prompts: How are they supporting pupil (re)engagement and catching up on missed learning? Describe the impact TAs are having on pupils, teachers, the school generally in terms of supporting recovery, and getting through the most recent disruption (Omicron).*
- Looking to the future, how do you think TAs will be deployed within the school? How does this relate to the needs of pupils as a result of the pandemic?
 - *Prompts: Are there any TA practices/assignments developed throughout Covid recovery that you think will remain? What do you think will change?*

4. Valuing TAs

- How do you think TAs have been impacted over the last two years?
- What do you do to ensure that they feel valued and recognised for their contributions to the school? Can you give us some examples?
 - *Prompts: Why do TAs stay at your school and not move to another school or another better-paid job? Describe what you have introduced as a school leader to ensure that TAs feel valued and included in school life. How do you monitor the impact of these measures?*
- What one piece of advice would you give other school leaders for recognising and/or rewarding TAs? Is there anything you would recommend that has been shown to be valuable within your context, but which costs little or no money?
- What advice would you give to the Education Secretary for better, and more publicly, recognising the role and contribution of TAs throughout Covid recovery and more generally?

TA interview schedule

1. During the pandemic

- How did your role as a TA change when the pandemic hit?
 - *Prompts: what roles did you take on during lockdown, and what impact did this have on pupils, teachers, and the school generally?*

2. Covid recovery

- From the beginning of this academic year (Sept 2021) to now, how have you been involved in Covid-recovery efforts within your school?
 - *Prompts: How are you supporting pupil (re)engagement and catching up on missed learning? What impact is this having on pupils, teachers, the school generally in terms of supporting recovery, and getting through the most recent disruption (Omicron)?*
- Looking to the future, how do you think TAs will be deployed within your school? How does this relate to the needs of pupils as a result of the pandemic?
 - *Prompts: Are there any TA practices/assignments developed throughout Covid recovery that you think will remain? What do you think will change?*

3. Valuing TAs

- How have you and your TA colleagues been impacted over the last two years?
- Describe the things that the school (inc. teachers) do to ensure that TAs feel valued and included?
 - *Prompts: Do schools have the appropriate resources to ensure TAs are recognised for their contribution? Is there anything else you would like to see introduced to support you?*
- What one piece of advice would you give other schools for recognising and/or rewarding TAs? Is there a strategy that has worked here that you would recommend?
- What advice would you give to the Education Secretary for better, and more publicly, recognising the role and contribution of TAs throughout Covid recovery and more generally?

Teacher interview schedule

1. During the pandemic

- How did Covid affect the ways in which TAs were deployed within your school?
 - *Prompts: what roles did your teaching assistants (TAs) take on during lockdown, and what effect did this have?*

2. Covid recovery

- From the beginning of this academic year (Sept 2021) to now, how have TAs been involved in Covid-recovery efforts within your school?
 - *Prompts: How are they supporting pupil (re)engagement and catching up on missed learning? Describe the impact TAs are having on pupils, teachers, the school generally in terms of supporting recovery, and getting through the most recent disruption (Omicron).*
- Looking to the future, how do you think TAs will be deployed within the school? How does this relate to the needs of pupils as a result of the pandemic?
 - *Prompts: Are there any TA practices/assignments developed throughout Covid recovery that you think will remain? What do you think will change?*

3. Valuing TAs

- How do you think TAs have been impacted over the last two years?
- What do you do as a teacher to ensure that TAs feel valued and recognised for their contributions to the school?
 - *Prompts: Why do TAs stay at your school and not move to another school or another better-paid job? Describe what you have introduced as a school leader to ensure that TAs feel valued and included in school life. How do you monitor the impact of these measures?*
- What one piece of advice would you give other teachers for recognising and/or rewarding TAs? Is there a strategy that has worked for you?
- What advice would you give to the Education Secretary for better, and more publicly, recognising the role and contribution of TAs throughout Covid recovery and more generally?