

Shape the Future Leaders Coalition

2025-26 Case Study

School: Stretford High School, Stretford, Greater Manchester

Project Leader: Rowena Kidd, Deputy Headteacher (Strand leader)

Supporting: Matt Hart (IT specialist) Essa Mustapha (IT Specialist) and Teaching Assistants

Research Strand: Addressing Inequity and the Digital Divide

Research Questions:

- In what ways can AI be used to support Teaching Assistants (and ease their burden) when charged with giving feedback to multiple SEND students in an in-class writing exercise?
- How can SEND students' AI familiarity be developed by introducing AI tools into the pedagogical process?
- What are the challenges and opportunities when introducing AI tools into the writing process in a low-resource setting?

Timeline: January - April 2026

Participants: Year 8 and 9 students (double disadvantaged: SEND + Pupil Premium), English and Science classes

Key Data Collection:

- Baseline and post-intervention assessments
- Teacher and TA interviews and surveys on tool effectiveness and workload impact
- Student interviews on motivation, engagement, and AI literacy
- Documentation of implementation challenges and adaptations
- Analysis of AI-generated feedback for subject accuracy and potential bias

The Challenge

Stretford High School serves a highly diverse community in Greater Manchester with 40% of students eligible for free school meals and 86% from ethnic minority backgrounds. Deputy Head Rowena Kidd faces a challenge that epitomizes the digital divide: her students who are both SEND and from low-income families, hence "double disadvantaged". They are precisely the learners who most need exposure to AI literacy for future employment, yet they're the least likely to have access at home or individualized support in school. Without 1:1 devices, Teaching Assistants must support multiple SEND students simultaneously during writing tasks in mainstream classrooms, often providing feedback that's rushed, generic, or comes too late to influence works-in-progress. The school's ethos centers on closing gaps, but resource constraints create a painful paradox: the students who would benefit most from frequent, scaffolded feedback are the ones least able to access it. Meanwhile, AI tools designed for

education often assume resources (devices, connectivity, technical expertise) that schools like Stretford don't have. Clearly, in theory, AI could help these students – but the question to answer is whether it can help in the reality of insufficient devices, limited TA time, and classrooms where paper and pen still dominate because that's what's feasible.

The Action Research Approach

Rather than accepting that AI implementation requires ideal conditions, Rowena and IT specialists Matt Hart & Essa Mustapha have built a solution around their constraints. They've developed a bespoke AI Co-Pilot with pre-loaded prompts organized by subject and learning objectives - dropdown menus that spare TAs from improvising prompts while maintaining pedagogical quality. Teachers collaborated on prompt design, ensuring alignment with curriculum goals and subject-specific feedback criteria. The implementation model is deliberately low-tech: Year 10 English and Science classes with high SEND populations, where TAs move around with 5-7 devices. Students work on paper; TAs scan their writing, select appropriate prompts from the dropdown menu, and the AI Co-Pilot offers feedback according to pre-established rubrics. The TA then works with the student to interpret and act on the feedback - AI as intermediary, not replacement. The research follows an action research cycle: baseline assessment of the double disadvantaged students (SEND + Pupil Premium) establishes starting points, with comparison data from non-disadvantaged students providing context for interpreting progress. TAs receive training on the tool, then carry out several weeks of classroom implementation with documentation of what works and what breaks. Post-intervention assessment captures changes in student performance, while qualitative interviews explore TA workload, student engagement and motivation, and AI literacy learning. The project also examines the AI feedback itself - checking for subject accuracy and potential bias, too.

The Broader Significance

This project confronts the equity paradox at the heart of AI in education: tools designed to personalize learning often widen gaps because they assume resource abundance. Focusing on what they have rather than what they don't Rowena's project asks "how can AI support the adults who are already supporting under-resourced students?" TAs are the critical link and unsung heroes of SEND support, expected to provide individualized attention to many students simultaneously. If AI can ease their burden while improving feedback quality, it addresses workforce sustainability alongside student outcomes. The bespoke prompt system challenges vendor-driven edtech - rather than adapting to commercial tools, Matt built a tool adapted to Stretford's context, curriculum, and constraints. Here, the stakes are clear: if AI can't work for these students in this context, claims about AI democratizing education need to be carefully rethought. The project also grapples honestly with implementation reality - consent forms that don't come back, devices that break, training that must fit into tight schedules, the friction of introducing new workflows into established classroom routines. Success here isn't a smooth proof-of-concept; it's messy evidence about what's possible when good intentions meet constraints, and whether AI can be a tool for equity rather than another layer of advantage for the already-advantaged.