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To cite this article: Lorenzo Ciletti (16 Nov 2023): The role of primary-school support staff in Italy: a case for re-thinking their professional characteristics, European Journal of Special Needs Education, DOI: [10.1080/08856257.2023.2282248](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2023.2282248)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2023.2282248>



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Published online: 16 Nov 2023.



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The role of primary-school support staff in Italy: a case for re-thinking their professional characteristics

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, support staff with limited teacher training (Teaching Assistants [TA]) are hired to support the mainstream education of children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND). Meanwhile, teachers instruct the whole class. Although TAs might help children with significant difficulties participating in the classroom (complex SEND), children with milder needs could overly rely on TAs' support to complete classroom tasks, ultimately compromising their thinking and learning. This study was conducted in an insufficiently examined and unique context (Italy), providing support staff (Support Teachers [ST]) with special- and mainstream-pedagogy training and overlapping whole-class responsibilities with classroom teachers. Drawing from classroom observations of an ST and interviews with 31 other STs in Italian primary schools, the findings illustrate that the STs primarily instructed children with SEND despite their level of need. Rarely did they collaborate with teachers in whole-class instruction. The interviewed STs widely associated their 'specialist' role with the broader perceptions that STs are better prepared for SEND support due to their special education training not available to teachers. STs' professional characteristics therefore create imperfect conditions seen elsewhere for the education of children with (mild) SEND. The findings have significant implications for re-thinking ST professional characteristics.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 July 2023
Accepted 31 October 2023

KEYWORDS

Children with special education needs and/or Disabilities; support teachers; support teacher deployment; teaching Assistants

Background

The typical characteristics of Support staff internationally

In 1994, the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Education* was the first international agreement endorsing a more equitable education for children with Special Education Needs and/or Disabilities (SEND) (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] 1994). On this occasion, national ministers agreed to remove any barrier to formal schooling for children with SEND (e.g. infrastructural and financial barriers) (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018). They also concurred to dismantle existing separate educational settings, including but not limited to schools catering for the education of just children with SEND (e.g. racially segregated schools) (UNESCO 1994). Where

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possible, the education of children with SEND was to be moved to mainstream schools and classrooms (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018).

To face this ever more relevant challenge of including children with SEND in the mainstream, schools worldwide hired support staff with limited, if any, teaching education (Teaching Assistants [TA]) (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2014). Whilst TAs in Spain, Ireland, and Switzerland became largely responsible for the personal care and behavioural management of children with SEND (e.g. washing children's hands, keeping them on task or dealing with their misconduct), TAs across the USA and the UK and Australia were employed to assist the children's classwork (Webster and Boer 2023). Meanwhile, teachers remained responsible for teaching the whole class while overseeing the specific tasks of TAs and supplying them with instructions (Navarro 2015). The TAs' minor, if any, teaching responsibility and teaching qualification also echoed lesser working benefits and conditions compared to teachers (e.g. low pay) (Navarro 2015).

In the twenty-first century, the utilisation of these 'new' teaching resources (the TAs) and their wide array of responsibilities prompted multiple research strands (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2014). One literature strand examined TAs' 'non-teaching' activities, such as the mentioned personal care offered to children with SEND, and TAs' emotional support – e.g. promotion of children's self-talk and positive emotions in the aftermath of negative academic results (Navarro 2015). Albeit these areas of research have potentially significant implications for children's welfare and well-being, limited evidence internationally has been produced to compute the extension of these TAs' practices and their impact on children (Webster and Boer 2023).

Another and perhaps more consistent bulk of the research explored TAs' behavioural and pedagogical support to children with and without SEND (Navarro 2015). Whilst international research found that TAs might enhance children's on-task behaviours (e.g. by overseeing their classroom activities), large-scale research in the UK suggested that children receiving the most support from TAs – namely, those with SEND – made less academic progress than their peers (Navarro 2015). This alarming result was considered as the unintended consequence of the decisions made by school heads and teachers about how TAs were employed and trained: in particular, the fact that a) UK schools largely hired TAs with limited entry-level teaching qualifications and b) generally, teachers provided TAs with insufficient instruction on how to go about supporting children effectively (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2011). As a result, TAs dealt with teaching practice with inadequate pedagogical preparedness and thus delivered ineffective instruction, harming children's learning (Navarro 2015).

The unique characteristics of support staff across Italian schools

While the earlier discussion has broad applicability internationally, it does not show the entire picture of support staff involvement in classroom practices (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2014). Indeed, Italian primary education establishes unique employment and training conditions for support staff, potentially echoing nuanced classroom practices and support staff deployment (Nes, Demo, and Ianes 2018). In this section, the description of the Italian educational policies and how these uniquely shape the role of 'Italian' support staff, known nationally as Support Teachers (ST), provides the rationale for conducting this research across Italian primary schools.

The mainstream education of children with SEND has a long history in Italy. Already in the 1970s, the legislators abolished the existing ‘special’ schools – namely, those catering education only to children with SEND (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018). Furthermore, they mandated that mainstream schools take care of the education for all children with SEND regardless of the level of their need (Devecchi et al. 2012). As a result, the overwhelming majority of children with SEND were taught in mainstream settings (Devecchi et al. 2012).

Between the 1970s and 1990s, the ST profession was also emerging (Nes, Demo, and lanes 2018). National laws established that schools would employ STs in proportion to children with SEND and deploy them across classrooms that included children with SEND (see Table 1). Unlike the many support staff around the world, responsible ‘just’ for the education and health and social care of children with SEND, STs were nonetheless expected to share whole-class duties with teachers (and have teacher’s salary schemes). That is, STs and teachers could co-design the classroom curriculum and co-teach children with and without SEND (Nes, Demo, and lanes 2018). To deal with these joint responsibilities, current legislation provided teachers and STs with forty paid hours for lesson planning (and school meetings) yearly and benefitted from two paid non-teaching hours weekly (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018).

Nonetheless, effective whole-class collaboration among practitioners was particularly foreseeable across classrooms including children with mild or without SEND (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018). Such children might not require frequent individual support to handle classroom tasks, thereby allowing both practitioners to work with the entire class (Nes, Demo, and lanes 2018). By contrast, schools and practitioners were advised (not mandated to) by national legislation to assign STs to the individual support of children with ‘complex’ SEND – namely, those with significant difficulties in dealing with the classroom curriculum or working on entirely different curricula from the rest of the class (Ministero dell’Istruzione [MI] and Ministero delle Finanze [MF] 2020). As a result, STs could address the educational needs of such complex cases while teachers manage whole-class instruction (MI 2020).

In the twenty-first century, the legislators also set out the highest qualification standards for support staff internationally (Devecchi et al. 2012). Notably, secondary-school STs were expected to achieve a) a university certificate on general pedagogy and b) a master’s degree in special education (MSE) as an alternative to the teachers’ compulsory

Table 1. Support staff and teachers’ similarities and differences in Italy and internationally*.

Professional features	Support Staff		Teachers Italy/Internationally
	Italy	Internationally	
Conditions of employment			
Competitive salary	✓	X	✓
Whole class duties	✓	X*	✓
The task of supporting children with SEND	✓	✓	✓
Employment/deployment per school classrooms	X	X	✓
Employment/deployment per child with SEND	✓	✓	X
Characteristics			
General Pedagogy qualification	✓	X	✓
Special Education qualification	✓	X	X

✓ and X refer to yes and no, respectively. *A wide international group of researched countries in Navarro (2015) and Webster and Boer (2023). **Support staff (TAs) are rarely deployed to manage whole-class instruction (Webster and Boer 2023).

initial qualifications specific to the subject they teach (e.g. mathematics or biology) (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica [ISTAT] 2022). By contrast, primary-school STs' job requirements included an MSE in addition to the required teaching qualifications for primary-school teachers (e.g. a Master of Science in primary education) (ISTAT 2022). This extra qualification currently allows primary-school STs to convert their role into teachers, while teachers' inverted switch to STs is not possible due to their 'training gaps' (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018).

Despite this unique Italian context, a significant gap exists in how this shapes the support staff classroom role and the education of children with SEND, particularly in Italian primary schools (Devecchi et al. 2012). Much of the international research has taken place in countries where support staff have received limited training and the role of supporting children with SEND (Navarro 2015). Hence, this study will bring to light the role of primary-school support staff in the unique, relatively unexamined context of Italian primary schools.

Theoretical underpinning

Effective deployment of support staff

Another unique focus of this study is that it uses influential theories in the field of support staff deployment to inform the interpretation of the research data. In particular, existent conceptualisations provide a framework to analyse the extent to which the identified support staff deployment might impact the learning of children with (and without) SEND. In this section, I, the author, describe these theoretical underpinnings based on the works of Giangreco. This and the following sections widely use the term TAs (and not support staff) since the literature reviewed pertains to contexts relying on these resources.

Internationally, Giangreco and colleagues pioneered studies into the role of TAs and how it shapes classroom dynamics across the USA (Navarro 2015). Their studies found that TAs play a crucial role in the education of children with SEND (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2014). Typically, they sit at the back of classrooms next to or in front of children with SEND (Giangreco 2009). From there, they instruct children with SEND one-to-one while teachers manage the whole class (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter 2014).

Whilst TAs seemingly reduce the teaching burden for teachers to instruct children with SEND, Giangreco (2009) argued that the TA deployment might create the conditions for children with SEND to be isolated from their peers, limiting their social interactions and classroom integration. Also, TAs might be a barrier to the children from receiving instruction from highly trained teaching professionals (such as teachers) and thus from more productive educational interactions (Webster and Boer 2023). Finally, children might overly rely on the ready-to-hand TAs to complete their classwork, thereby further compromising their thinking and learning (Giangreco 2009).

However, these negative impacts might not involve children with significant difficulties in independently participating in classroom activities or working on entirely different curricula from the rest of the class (henceforth children with complex SEND) (Giangreco 2009). On the contrary, they may benefit from the individual support of support staff (or teachers) to engage with their classroom material (Giangreco 2009). Moreover, children with complex needs might benefit from timely, one-to-one interventions on specific

topics (such as algebra or literacy) supplied by TAs or other teaching professionals in special units or rooms (Navarro 2015). Away from their classrooms and their noises, children might focus on the activities and learn more effectively (Giangreco 2009). Also, the limited extension of the interventions might not harm their classroom integration and peer relationships (Navarro 2015).

To confirm and expand Giangreco's 2009 findings, Blatchford, Russell, and Webster (2011) designed a significant, previously-unseen-scale research in the UK: the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff in Schools (DISS) project. The project showed that despite the fact that TAs across the UK rarely possess entry-level teaching qualifications, they nonetheless provide individual pedagogical support for children with SEND inside and outside their classrooms (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2011).

The DISS project also illustrated a concerning picture of TA practice in the UK (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2011). While the research data showed the important role of TAs in enhancing children's on-task behaviour, the evidence suggested that the more time the participating TAs spent individually supporting the children, the less they progressed (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2011). What is more, the TAs were typically illustrated as overly supporting the classwork of children with (and without) SEND, such as immediately providing children with solutions to classroom tasks (Navarro 2015). As a result, the pupils seemed to minimise their cognitive effort in completing classroom tasks and learning (Navarro 2015). Hence, the DISS project confirmed that the TAs' one-to-one support to children (and their limited teacher training) might create the conditions for children's task dependence and minor learning (Navarro 2015).

Since the DISS project, much has changed in the UK. For instance, training in pedagogical skills is widely available across the UK for TAs (e.g. foundation degrees) (Navarro 2015). Furthermore, more recent UK legislation introduced Higher Level TAs (HLTA) (Devecchi et al. 2012). This supporting staff group must undergo a specific training and assessment programme (Navarro 2015). Also, HLTAs could be hired to supervise and train other support staff (such as TAs) and deliver whole-class instruction in the teacher's absence (Navarro 2015). Hence, the validity of some of the DISS project's findings, particularly concerning TA training, may be threatened by recent UK reforms.

With this literature in mind, I explored the deployment of a small sample of primary-school support staff in Italy (Support Teachers [ST]). The identified STs' deployment was interpreted according to Giangreco's (2009) overreliance theory: the more support staff works individually with children with (and without) SEND, the more they create the chances for children to overly rely on their assistance and thus think and learn less. By contrast, children potentially maximise their thinking and learning when support staff (and teachers) do not work in close proximity to and frequently support their activities. Exceptions to this rule were considered for children with complex SEND. For such cases, ST' (or teachers') frequent one-to-one instruction and support was identified as the optimal solution.

Factors underpinning support staff deployment and effectiveness

Whilst it is important to explore the support staff role and how this potentially impacts children's learning, the literature also emphasises the need to take into account the factors underpinning support staff deployment and teaching effectiveness (Devecchi et al. 2012).

Indeed, a clear and fair picture of the support staff role and effectiveness (output) is provided when this is related to how national policies and school practices do or do not promote support staff pedagogical preparedness or how these inform support staff classroom position and activities (input) (Jardí et al. 2022). In this section, the illustration of two influential strands of literature will further make a case for exploring elements underpinning the support staff role and effectiveness in this research, along with providing a preliminary theoretical framework to examine the field (e.g. interpret the research data).

In the DISS project, Blatchford, Russell, and Webster (2011) produced substantial evidence of support staff ineffective practice in children's learning. The researchers argued, however, that TAs were not at fault. UK school policies outside TAs' control were responsible for the result (Webster and Boer 2023). Of note, the TAs' deployment was considered to be the repetition of TAs' conditions of employment, inviting them to individually support children with (or without) SEND (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2011). Ultimately, this deployment could create the opportunity for an over-reliance of children on TAs and minor learning (Giangreco 2009). A second illustration was that (past) UK school policies, such as lack of training standards for TAs, did not seem to effectively encourage TA pedagogical preparedness (Navarro 2015). As a result, TAs might be unprepared to handle the teaching practice and do so ineffectively (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2011).

While acknowledging the important part played by school policies, another literature strand suggested that the school community's cultural dispositions are perhaps more crucial in the support staff deployment and effectiveness (Jardí et al. 2022). For instance, Devecchi and Rouse's (2010) study across the UK indicated that school heads and teachers could envision the support staff role as that of a whole-class instructor. As a result, headteachers might provide TAs with enough freedom to instruct the whole class alongside classroom teachers (Devecchi and Rouse 2010). Also, teachers embracing this 'co-teaching ethos' were reported spending sufficient time with TAs prior to lessons in order to share the planned classroom activities and topics (Biggs, Gilson, and Carter 2016). This way, they enhanced TAs' lesson subject preparedness and, thus, their confidence to be involved in whole-class teaching and effectiveness (Jardí et al. 2022).

By contrast, school heads and teachers (and TAs themselves) who considered TAs covering additional duties than teachers, namely, supporting the classwork children with SEND, were found designing practices that fostered this understanding (Devecchi and Rouse 2010). For instance, headteachers were reported only to include teachers in school meetings involving pedagogical matters, while TAs had their own separate meetings and training on more practical matters (e.g. how to support children with SEND) (Devecchi and Rouse 2010). Also, teachers commonly invited TAs to support the classwork of children with SEND and rarely engage in whole-class teaching (Jardí et al. 2022). These school procedures, ultimately, echoed TAs' one-to-one assistance to children with SEND in practice, hence creating the risk for children's overreliance on TAs and minor learning (Devecchi and Rouse 2010).

In short, the support staff role (and effectiveness) might result from multiple factors, such as school policies, values, and practices. These multiple factors have, however, been relatively unexamined in the literature (Jardí et al. 2022). Much of the existing international research focused 'just' on support staff deployment and how this impacts children's education (Navarro 2015). Hence, this research

explored the school policies and practices influencing support staff roles across a small sample of primary schools in Italy. To this end, support staff perceptions were examined due to their direct and thus comprehensive knowledge of the matter (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018).

Methods

This research investigated the deployment of a small sample of primary-school support staff in Italy (support teachers [ST]) and the factors shaping their classroom deployment. The following overarching questions and sub-questions particularly informed the analysis:

- (1) How are primary-school STs deployed?
 - (i) Where do they predominantly work (e.g. inside or outside the classrooms)?
 - (ii) What are their classroom positions?
 - (iii) Who do they predominantly work with?
- (2) What factors do primary-school STs perceive could be associated with their deployment?

A pragmatic methodological approach was used (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018). Methods were selected (and modified) for their capability to address the theoretical problems identified. Practical constraints also influenced the research methods' selection and analysis. Notably, the research data were drawn from existing research exploring the work of STs across two independent studies. The first study relied on classroom observations of a single ST-teacher dyad (Study 1). The second involved a small sample of interviews and questionnaires with primary-school STs (Study 2). Ethical approval was granted for both studies. The following subsections provide more information on the two studies and related methods and how these addressed the research questions.

Study 1

Study 1 explored the pedagogical role of a single ST (Research Question [RQ] 1). Classroom observations were used. These produced first-hand and in-depth information on the phenomenon (Croll 1986).

The participating ST (pseudonym Melanie) was purposefully selected as she had achieved an MSE and general teaching qualifications and signed a contract providing her with whole-class responsibilities. Similar recruitment procedures were also used for Study 2. Recruited STs effectively represented the common professional characteristics of primary-school STs across Italy (ISTAT 2022).

As part of the study and before the classroom observations, Melanie completed a questionnaire about her demographics and the characteristics of the classroom she instructed in. The questionnaire indicated Melanie was a young (30–39 age range) Italian female. Her class included a child requiring 'always' or 'very often' individual support to handle the classroom curriculum (complex SEND).

Data collection and analysis

Melanie was video-recorded for about 12 hours over six school days. Video recordings were made via a camera on a tripod. While the camera's target pointed at Melanie (and part of the class), the camera was placed in the recess of a classroom window to avoid interfering with the classroom's activities or facing Melanie and the class. This way, I, the author, minimised their perceptions of being observed (Croll 1986). During the (video) observations, unsystematic handwritten notes in English about classroom dynamics and layout, classroom teacher and Melanie's positions, and lesson topics were also taken (Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2011). As a result, evidence was collected to address Research Sub-Question ii and to provide background to the video data.

While field notes were kept in their narrative form, three stages were followed to systematically process the video data (Croll 1986). In Phase 1, I constructed thematically organised observational schedules: a) ST audience, whom the ST interacts with (e.g. a child with SEND, a group of children, or the whole class); b) location of the ST (i.e. inside or outside the classroom), c) ST mode (i.e. interacting or not interacting). The schedules' codes largely echoed previous ones in the literature (see Blatchford, Russell, and Webster 2011 for details). A few categories were also built inductively by observing the video data (e.g. ST interacting with a child without SEND in group settings). These schedules covered themes, such as ST's location and audience, instrumental in addressing Research Sub-Questions i and iii. In Phase 2, I applied time sampling techniques to measure the frequency of appearance of such codes in the continuity of the video data (Croll 1986). That is, I converted the videos in 10-second intervals. Next, in each interval, I coded the longest-lasting category among the codes of each observation schedule (i.e. predominant coding) (Croll 1986). In Phase 3, the codes were collated in frequency tables (see Table 3 for illustration). Melanie's (proximity to and) frequency of support to children with and without SEND was interpreted in line with Giangreco's 2009 overreliance theory (see Discussion).

Finally, I measured the reliability of the (video) analysis via the inter-coder-agreement (ICA) method (O'Connor and Joffe 2020). To this end, I trained an additional observer to use the research coding system. After the training, I shared a day of observation of about two hours (20% of the total video observations), and the list of codes and definitions. Next, the trained observer and I independently coded the session. I then measured ICA on an event-by-event basis rather than comparing the total categorical frequencies (Croll 1986). Cohen's Kappa was calculated to safeguard the agreement measure from the possibility that the two observers had coded similarly by chance (O'Connor and Joffe 2020). The high level of agreement (0.80 [ST audience]; 0.77 [ST mode]; 1.00 [ST location]) reassured me of the trustworthiness of the analysis (Croll 1986). Thus, there was no need to adapt the coding system further or reanalyse the data.

Study 2

Study 2 gathered information to shed further light on Study 1 findings (Research Question [RQ] 1) and provided important information on the educational factors that STs perceived as influencing their deployment (RQ2). The study relied on questionnaires and interviews completed by 31 STs. The tools were selected as being flexible enough to allow the

replication and extension of Study 1's findings (Alwin 2007). Also, they effectively examine participants' perceptions (RQ2) (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018).

Study 2's sample size was more significant than Study 1's. That was possible because Study 2 primarily relied on easier to collect and handle textual information (e.g. transcripts of interviews) (Alwin 2007). The larger sample was also intended to compensate for the minor 'depth' of this textual information describing classroom activities than Study 1's observational data (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018). This gave Study 2 an equal ability to produce new evidence to address the research questions or confirm existing themes coming from Study 1 (e.g. STs' location). Moreover, a larger sample was felt adequate to increase readers' confidence in the applicability of the research findings to a larger population of STs (Alwin 2007).

The 31 female participants earned STs' teaching requirements (e.g. an MSE). Table 2 reports the participants' age group and the complexity of the needs of the classroom children with SEND they taught.

Data collection and analysis

In an initial phase, Study 2's STs were invited to provide a wide range of information through a questionnaire, such as their demographics and classroom deployment. Also, the questionnaire collected information as to whether they work predominantly inside or outside their classrooms, which was instrumental in addressing Research Sub-Question i. The questionnaire items were multiple-choice questions, except for the time-log task. This latter activity consisted of three time-log spreadsheets, dividing three classroom hours across three different school days into four intervals of 20 minutes. Participants were asked to fill each interval with the child/ren they work predominantly with among a predetermined list of audiences similar to one of Study 1's observational schedules (e.g. a child with SEND or the whole class). This task collected data intended to address Research Sub-Question iii. To facilitate their accurate reporting, participants were invited to complete each time log after the daily lesson (and not all at once).

Table 2. Characteristics of Study 2 participants.

ST characteristics	Frequency counts	%
Age		
<30	4	13%
30–39	7	23%
40–49	15	48%
50–59	5	16%
≥ 60	0	0%
Level of need of children with SEND taught*		
Child with mild SEND	3	10%
Child with moderate SEND	6	19%
Child with complex SEND	22	71%

The data were collected through the STs' questionnaires. Children's level of need* was coded as follows: children 'never' or 'rarely' requiring individual support were coded as mild SEND; children 'sometimes' requiring individual assistance were coded as moderate SEND; children 'always' or 'very often' requiring individual support were labelled complex SEND.

Shortly thereafter, participants took part in audio-recorded interviews. The interviews probed the information gathered in the questionnaire. Also, these extended Study 2's evidence, in particular, concerning the STs' classroom positions (Research Sub-Question ii) and their teaching collaboration with teachers. Furthermore, interviews addressed RQ2, which could not be answered in Study 1 or through the questionnaire.

While data from the questionnaire were collated in frequency tables or gathered in broader thematic categories or intervals (see [Table 2](#) for illustration), interview data were processed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). A multiple-phase approach was used to work out the codes and overarching themes. First, the audio recording was transcribed verbatim in Word documents. Second, the data were interrogated in relation to the research questions to proceed with the thematic coding of the data.

Once the analysis was completed, I calculated the inter-coder agreement (ICA) to ensure the reliability of the (thematic) analysis (O'Connor and Joffe 2020). To do so, I trained an additional Italian researcher on the coding procedures. Next, I shared four extracts of the transcriptions and the coding system. These interview extracts were segmented to include a) sections the authors had coded in the analysis process and b) sections with a coherent theme irrelevant to the analysis, known as the 'no coding' category in the coding system. The coder independently provided a label for each segment. ICA was measured by comparing my analysis of these extracts with that of the external observer (Croll 1986). Cohen's Kappa was finally calculated (Croll 1986). The high level of agreement (0.68) reassured the trustworthiness of the analysis (O'Connor and Joffe 2020).

In the findings, the thematic analysis is displayed in two forms. The first is through the (literally translated) quotation of extracts corresponding to key codes of the analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The second illustration presents the frequency of categories coded in the dataset (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012).

Findings

Research Question 1

Melanie (Study 1) and most of Study 2's STs ($n = 25$) were observed or self-reported working inside the classroom (Research Sub-Question i). The remaining STs suggested *sometimes* (two STs), *very often* (three STs), or *always* (one ST; pseudonym Angela) supporting a single child with SEND outside their classrooms with specific interventions about grammar or reading comprehension.

Inside the classrooms, the STs positioned themselves in proximity to classroom children with SEND (Research Sub-Question ii). Apart from Angela, who reported working '*in the school library solely with the child with SEND*', most of the STs were observed (Melanie) or self-reported to be seated at the back or on the side of classrooms, and next to or in front of children with SEND. Rarely did they report working alongside the teachers positioned at the front of the classroom and facing the whole class (two STs) or moving around the classroom while the teachers kept their central position and the management of the whole class (four STs).

In their position, the STs mostly supported or reported supporting children through private one-to-one conversations, not involving other class members (Research Sub-Question iii). Rarely did they instruct or report instructing the whole class or children

Table 3. Sts frequencies of assistance to the class (inside the classroom).

ST audience/auditor	Study 1		Study 2	
	Frequency counts	%	Frequency counts	%
Child with SEND	1539	83%	224	84%
One to one	1539	83%	201	75%
Group settings	0	0%	23	9%
Child without SEND	285	15%	16	6%
One to one	265	14%	15	6%
Group settings	20	1%	1	0%
Whole class	24	1%	27	10%

Study 1 and Study 2's data were coded in 10 sec and 20 min intervals, respectively. The Table excludes instances of ST in non-interaction mode, accounting for 739 frequency counts (FC) in Study 1 and 0 FC in Study 2.

without SEND (See Table 3). As the field notes (Study 1) and interviews (Study 2) indicated, these were the prerogative of classroom teachers.

Finally, the results from the classroom observations (Study 1) and time logs (Study 2) illustrated that the STs supplied similar highly individualised assistance to all children with SEND regardless of their level of need: in particular,

- *Children with complex SEND* were observed or reported receiving 83% and 76% of ST one-to-one support in Study 1 and Study 2, respectively, and 0% (Study 1) and 7% (Study 2) of ST group settings support.
- *Children with moderate SEND* were reported receiving 81% and 8% of ST one-to-one and group settings support, respectively (Study 2 data only).
- *Children with mild SEND* were reported receiving 59% and 22% of ST one-to-one and group settings support, respectively (Study 2 data only).

Research Question 2

Study 2 indicated a few plausible justifications for the STs' role. One of these included their preparedness in special education (23% of codes addressing Research Question [RQ] 2). Of note, the participants reported that STs frequently earn an MSE and attend In-Service Training (INSET) courses in special education, whereas class teachers primarily undertake courses on mainstream pedagogy (see extract below). As a result, teachers tend to take the lead for the instruction of the whole class, which they feel prepared for, and STs work with children with SEND.

Interviewer: 'Why are you the only one working with the child with SEND, although you and [the teacher] are [by law] equal partners?'

ST: 'Because we have an additional qualification and training [so] we can say that we are better prepared to work with the child [with SEND]. I believe this is the reason'. (Interview No. 10)

In addition, STs' conditions of employment might play a role (31% of the codes addressing RQ2). Notably, a participant argued that the hiring of STs as a proportion of schoolchildren with SEND makes them *de facto* teachers of these children (see the extract below for evidence).

Interviewer: 'Is the ST designated to work with the entire class?' 'Theoretically, STs are designated to work with the class'.

ST: 'And what about the practice?'

ST: 'In practice, [the school heads] assign you to the child [with SEND]. Moreover, there are many teachers convinced [...] that you are [there] because there is a child [with SEND], and you are there just for them'. (Interview No. 24).

The STs finally believed that their 'special' conditions of employment (and qualifications) could sway the social understanding of the ST role, leading parents and head-teachers to associate STs 'only' with the education of children with SEND (47% of the codes addressing RQ2). Moreover, they might directly shape STs' beliefs. For instance, a participant (extract below) convincingly argued that STs are contractually bound to deal with the education of children with SEND, who consequently and 'legitimately' work with children with SEND.

ST: 'I am the ST, and rightly so, [I teach the child with SEND]. We cannot change the roles'.

Interviewer: 'By law?'

ST: 'By law! [...] The ST and teachers have different contracts. I have the ST role and so must teach [the children with SEND]'. (Interview No. 16).

Discussion

This research explored the deployment of a small sample of STs across Italian primary classrooms (Research Question [RQ] 1). It also sought to examine the factors the STs perceived to have influenced their deployment (RQ2). The first part of this section displays the identified ST deployment strategies and how they possibly impacted the education of children with SEND. The second investigates RQ2's findings and discusses the research implications for policy and practice. The following discussion must nonetheless be evaluated considering the main research limitations. Notably, the research unit of observation (the STs) did not include children with and without SEND crucial to establishing the STs' educational effectiveness in their learning (e.g. through evaluating their academic progress). Also, teachers and school heads were not included in the analysis despite having a key role in informing STs' deployment (Biggs, Gilson, and Carter 2016); thus, they might have confirmed and extended information to address RQ2.

The classroom observations (Study 1) and questionnaire data (Study 2) show that the participating STs frequently reported or were observed working with children with SEND. Rarely did they report or were they observed instructing children outside their classrooms. Also, they infrequently collaborated with classroom teachers for whole-class instruction despite Italian laws requiring otherwise (ISTAT 2022).

Moreover, the STs did not vary their classroom role according to the complexity of the needs of children with SEND. The STs reported or were observed providing 80% or more assistance to children with either mild or moderate or complex SEND. Whilst this level of support might effectively assist children with significant difficulties in engaging with the classroom tasks or group work (complex SEND), children with milder needs (29% of the sample) may overly rely on the STs' help to complete the classroom tasks, compromising

their thinking and learning. More data on the STs' pedagogical practice and children's academic results is nonetheless needed to confirm this theoretical interpretation of STs' impact on children's learning.

Prior small-scale observation studies also showed similar findings. Among these, Nes et al. (2018), Borgonovi and Ciletti (2018), and D'Alessio (2012) observed primary- and secondary-school STs across more than 16 classrooms. Their results illustrated that the STs mainly deal with the in-classroom individual instruction of children with SEND, regardless of their level of need. Meanwhile, the teachers appeared to manage the whole class. Thus, the current study's findings seemingly apply to a wider (yet small) group of STs across Italian schools.

In the interviews (Study 2), the participants argued that STs' professional characteristics, which differ from those of teachers, seemingly repeated in and justified their classroom deployment. Notably, they suggested that the teachers and the wider school community perceive STs as better prepared for SEND support (than teachers) due to their extra education and training in special education. Thus, they were consequently assigned or accepted to be assigned to work with children with SEND. The STs also associated their classroom roles with some of their employment conditions: the legislation mandating schools to employ STs based on the number of schoolchildren with SEND. This legislation seemingly creates a set of circumstances for STs to work with those children only. Also, this law might inform cultural dispositions and practices by school heads and teachers (*'[the school heads] assign you to the child [with SEND]'*), whereby STs should work with children with SEND only. At times, the STs themselves seemed to embrace this cultural belief. As a result, the STs instruct children with SEND and never engage in whole-class teaching.

Despite this being an unintentional result of the Italian educational policies, the prevalence of ST one-to-one support to children with SEND should not be taken lightly by the legislators and school heads. The identified deployment could create imperfect conditions seen elsewhere for the education of children with mild SEND (Navarro 2015). What is of further concern for the Italian legislators is that the similarity of employment and training patterns amongst the participants and the 'Italian' population of STs increases the confidence in the broader validity of the research findings (ISTAT 2022). That is, the identified ST role may be widely transferred amongst Italian primary schools.

Thus, I recommend that Italian legislators and school heads remove the existing professional characteristics of STs that make them different from teachers, potentially compromising STs' whole-class teaching role, their equal teaching partnership with classroom teachers, and effective education practices for children with SEND. I particularly encourage the establishment of similar hiring and deployment strategies of teachers and STs, with two teaching professionals (ST + teachers) employed and used across the classroom with complex needs, such as classrooms hosting a large number of students (e.g. 30 pupils and above) and children with complex SEND. Also, I invite the legislators to require classroom teachers to improve their knowledge of special education by, for instance, attending INSET on SEND matters or obtaining an MSE in the case of applicant teachers. These changes might remove the connection between the deployment of support staff with classrooms hosting children with SEND and, thus, the current automatic *de facto* assignment of one adult (the teacher) to the whole class and the other (the ST) to the education of children with SEND due to extra special knowledge in SEND matters.

These reforms nonetheless require a new cultural ethos to be effectively implemented (Devecchi et al. 2012). School communities nationwide must espouse the notion that STs are whole-class instructors. To this end, national ministers (and researchers) should consider running national campaigns illustrating the positive effects of the teachers-STs' equal collaboration. Also, teachers and STs should be provided with enhanced training on how to establish effective co-teaching partnerships (Devecchi et al. 2012).

This research is therefore essential to raising awareness of the need for research, policy, and practice to consider structural policies and how these interplay with wider school ethos when exploring support staff deployment and effectiveness. These elements significantly contribute to shaping the type of collaboration support staff establish with teachers and the education of children with and without SEND. More research is urgently needed to extend our understanding of the field. The support staff is a vital workforce internationally. Thus, the educational and research communities should ensure they have the best working conditions and training for such a responsible role.

Acknowledgments

This publication was supported by the Economic Social Research Council – UK Research and Innovation under Grant ES/Y007387/1.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic Social Research Council – UK Research and Innovation [ES/Y007387/1].

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