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**Teaching and Learning Support in Schools: Exploring the Well-Being of Teaching and Learning Support Assistants and the Views of Children and Young People who Engage with their Support**

by

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## Abstract

Education is a demanding sector with significant pressures placed on staff to support children in achieving academically and thriving socially and emotionally. Teaching and Learning Support Assistants (TLSAs) play a crucial role in helping schools meet these demands. However, despite their essential contributions, TLSAs receive variable training and support and enter the role with differing experiences. Additionally, the role of a TLSA has changed considerably over time, leading to a lack of clarity about their responsibilities. While research has examined the impact of the demanding education sector on the well-being of teachers, the well-being of TLSAs has been overlooked. Moreover, given the interdependent nature of TLSAs' well-being and their effectiveness in supporting students, it is essential to understand children and young people's perceptions of the support they receive from TLSAs.

This thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of TLSAs in UK schools by exploring both the well-being of staff who provide support and students' perceptions and lived experiences of receiving that support. First, a systematic review of 19 qualitative studies was conducted to thematically synthesise individuals' views of TLSAs' support in primary and secondary schools. Second, 176 TLSAs responded to a UK-wide mixed-methods survey including the Workplace PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2014) and open-ended questions on their lived experiences as current employees in UK primary schools. Additionally, peer support groups were piloted in two UK primary school settings to enhance TLSAs' well-being and this intervention was evaluated using a mixed-methods approach. Findings are discussed in terms of their implications for improving practice.

*Keywords:*

*Teaching and Learning Support Assistants, Primary School, Well-Being, Positive Psychology*

# Table of Contents

## Table of Tables

## Table of Figures

**List of Accompanying Materials**

- Quantitative and demographic responses from the Qualtrics survey for thesis titled 'Teaching and learning support in schools: exploring the well-being of teaching and learning support assistants and the views of children and young people who engage with their support' (Excel file)

- Qualitative responses from Qualtrics survey for thesis titled 'Teaching and learning support in schools: exploring the well-being of teaching and learning support assistants and the views of children and young people who engage with their support' (Excel file)

- Participant information sheet and consent form (for the National Survey part of the research) for thesis titled 'Teaching and learning support in schools: exploring the well-being of teaching and learning support assistants and the views of children and young people who engage with their support' (Word document)

Teaching and Learning Support in Statutory Education

**Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship**

Print name: Hannah Jayne Godfrey

Title of thesis: Teaching and Learning Support in UK Schools: Exploring the Well-Being of Teaching and Learning Support Assistants and the Views of Children and Young People who Engage with their Support

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission.

Signature:                                    Date:      1st June 2025

## Acknowledgements

**Definitions and Abbreviations**

CPD ................................ Continuing Professional Development

DISS................................ Deployment and Impact of Support Staff

EHCP ............................. Education, Health and Care Plan

ELSA............................... Emotional Literacy Support Assistant

HPM ............................... Human Potential Movement

JD-R............................... Job-Demands Resource

LAT ................................ Local Authority Trust

MeLSA ............................ Mediated Learning Support Approach

NS.................................. National Survey

PRISMA .......................... Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

PSG ............................... Peer Support Groups

RTA................................ Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SDT................................ Self-Determination Theory

SEMH.............................. Social, Emotional and Mental Health

SENCo ............................ Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator

SENDA............................ Special Educational Needs and Disability Act

SLR ................................ Systematic Literature Review

SLT ................................ Senior Leadership Team

STPCd ............................ School Teachers' Pay and Conditions document

TLSA............................... Teaching and Learning Support Assistant *(this phrase captures anyone working within the role of a teaching or learning support assistant or equivalent)*

VRA................................ Voluntary Research Assistant

WEIRD ............................ Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic

## Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Aims

The empirical part of this research thesis aims to develop an understanding of the well-being and lived experiences of Teaching and Learning Support Assistants (TLSAs) within UK primary schools. This topic area was chosen because despite TLSAs being an integral part of the UK education system, their lived experiences and well-being are, currently, under-researched.

My systematic literature review (SLR) aims to synthesise the existing literature exploring children and young people's views about their experiences of being supported by TLSAs in education. It is hoped that synthesising the existing literature will enable a more comprehensive understanding of children's views to be available and, as a result, future TLSA deployment and practice can be appropriately considered in light of the findings.

## 1.2 Rationale and this thesis project's place within the research literature

In the existing literature within the education sector, a wealth of knowledge exists regarding teachers' well-being (Dreer, 2023). However, despite TLSAs holding somewhat similar roles to those of teachers, there has been significantly less research interest and investment into understanding and supporting their well-being. TLSAs are included within the annual Teacher Wellbeing Index (Education Support, 2024) but they are grouped under 'support staff'. This means that their data is considered with colleagues such as catering and administration staff who hold an important but somewhat different role. TLSAs spend a high proportion of their time within the classroom directly supporting teaching and learning whereas, in comparison, the same is not necessarily true for the other support staff roles in school.

Although there is an acknowledged dearth of research into TLSA well-being, Ravalier and colleagues' (2021) work is a notable exception. Their research aimed to investigate working conditions for TLSAs in the UK and identify whether risk factors (that had previously

been identified as correlating with stress in the teaching profession) similarly influenced TLSAs. These risk factors included psychosocial hazards, student and parental behaviour, and working hours. Although the research involved TLSAs working in primary, secondary and specialist school settings, the findings identified that primary school TLSAs experienced the widest range of stressors compared to their colleagues in other settings. This highlighted a particular degree of urgency to support TLSAs employed within primary school settings. In this way, Ravalier et al's (2021) quantitative research offered some valuable insights into the stressors that TLSAs encounter and identified that further qualitative research would be helpful to develop a more informed perspective; this offered a clear platform for my own research.

When forming my research design, I considered the existing literature and the identified research gaps, as well as acknowledging the time available to me for my thesis work. Whilst it would have been beneficial to invite TLSAs working across the full range of education settings to share their views, this was not deemed manageable for this particular project. Therefore, I aimed to build on Ravalier's (2021) work by narrowing my lens and recruitment strategy to focus solely on primary school-employed TLSAs, as this was the subgroup identified to encounter the most stressors within their role.

I chose to use the PERMA Workplace Profiler (Kern, 2014) after considering other well-being measures, such as the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing (Tennant et al., 2007) and Satisfaction with Life Scales (Diener et al., 1985), as the PERMA Workplace Profiler was specifically designed to investigate workplace well-being, which was the construct of focus within this research. In comparison, other measures considered investigated well-being more broadly. I had used the PERMA Workplace Profiler (Kern, 2014) measure during previous research during my Doctoral training which focussed on the well-being of Educational Psychologists. Consequently, I had some previous experience and knowledge about the administration and scoring process for the PERMA Workplace Profiler which also increased my confidence in using it.

It felt important to try and bring together the findings from both Study 1 (a national survey) and Study 2 (pilot peer support groups) so that the two data collection streams could be more easily considered together as one body of research. The qualitative data from Study 1 was coded using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and, during this, it was identified that some participants shared views that related to their hopes for the future of the TLSA role. These views were interpreted and formed into two themes: *desire for advancing knowledge, skills and resources* and *time to connect with colleagues*. As the data collection methods in Study 2 also involved gathering qualitative responses with questions aiming to explore the lived experiences of participants who had been involved in the peer support groups, it was decided that using the themes formed through RTA in Study 1 would enable the researcher to evaluate whether the experiences of those in the peer support groups aligned with the desires and hopes that participants in Study 1 had shared about their hopes for the future of the TLSA role. I was conscious that using a deductive coding approach would require me to be mindful of reflexivity and, as a result, I engaged with regular personal reflections and supervision throughout the process. This was to ensure that I was not interpreting the data with bias towards the predetermined themes that I had formed. In addition, to keep the likelihood of bias risk as low as possible whilst using a deductive coding approach, I employed deductive manifest content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016) as this process encourages the researcher to stay close to the literal meaning of what participants have written or said, rather than attempting to infer underlying meanings. This reduced the likelihood of attributing non-relevant or ambiguous meaning to the data collected.

In relation to my SLR, I considered how there were a selection of papers that explored children's views of TLSA support but a systematic literature review to bring these together did not yet exist. Interestingly, a SLR about teachers' views of working with TLSAs (Jackson, 2021) was present within the literature. However, conversely, a synthesis of children's views, who are the main beneficiaries of TLSA support, had not been synthesised. Given the identified gap in the SLR research, I was enthusiastic to develop this area of research. I felt that this would be helpful for school staff as well as other professionals such

as Educational Psychologists, given that this profession often offers suggestions about how children may be best supported. As a Trainee Educational Psychologist, I try to bring in the voice of the child into the meetings that I facilitate and, in a child's absence, this often involves us hypothesising what they may say if they were present. Synthesising the literature within this area felt worthwhile as I perceived that this would support professionals, such as Teachers and Educational Psychologists to be able to form evidence-informed hypotheses in meetings, when considering how children and young people may feel about engaging with TLSA support.

**1.3 Ontology and Epistemology**

The empirical paper adopted a mixed methods research approach as well-being is a construct which has had numerous measures conceptualised to measure it (Zhang et al., 2024). However, whilst it is thought to be measurable, the way in which individuals experience well-being across different contexts, such as the workplace, could greatly differ. Therefore, within this research, I utilised the Workplace PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2014) to measure well-being, alongside additional qualitative questions to further my understanding of TLSAs' well-being and lived experiences. Throughout the qualitative elements of my empirical research paper, I adopted an interpretivist epistemological stance. This stance was taken as it aligned with my views that interpretations, interactions and collaboration help to form a wider and richer knowledge base from which increased understanding and support can be derived. I was mindful that I interpreted the constructions formed and brought them together to contribute to the wider body of knowledge (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Hiller, 2016). Within interpretivism, the researcher holds a central role in knowledge construction and brings their perceptions, beliefs and values to the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition to the interpretivist stance, I concurrently employed the lens of a critical realist as I decided there would be much merit in also utilising the Workplace PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2014), which is a quantitative measure. Therefore, this element of my research could not be defined as wholly interpretivist as I was reliant upon numerical scores to support my

understanding of TLSAs' well-being. Critical realism posits that observable events are the result of unobservable yet manipulable internal mechanisms (Bhaskar, 1975; Zhang, 2023). I am conscious that there are a plethora of factors that will influence the reality that TLSAs form and such factors include but are not limited to: the school's senior leadership team (SLT) who are likely to impose different values and approaches, colleagues that TLSAs work alongside and, in addition, the geographical area and communities that the school serves. Therefore, the stance of critical realism encapsulates the way in which I perceive TLSAs will be influenced by their environment when constructing their own reality.

## 1.4 Reflexivity and Axiology

Central to conducting qualitative research is the notion of reflexivity. Reflexivity is the acknowledgement that the research is influenced and shaped by personal and theoretical viewpoints (Willig, 2019). I am mindful that my assumptions, expectations and choices of research design will have influenced the research that I have conducted. In addition, my own viewpoints will have been influenced by both my personal and professional background and my epistemological stance will also have implications on all aspects of this thesis project, including how I have interpreted and reported my findings.

Having been fortunate enough to have worked in multiple educational settings as a Teaching Assistant, Teacher, Assistant Educational Psychologist, and now current Trainee Educational Psychologist, I have been able to experience and view the TLSA role from multiple perspectives. Through such experiences, I have become aware of the various approaches and cultures that exist within school settings, as well as some of the views that people hold about the role together with the subsequent impact that these can have on TLSAs' working conditions and well-being. Through my experiences, I have learnt that there seems to be a general sense of being *'done to'* rather than *'done with'* when it comes to support and approaches to working with TLSAs. Throughout this thesis journey, I have noted this to be somewhat true as there is very limited research into TLSAs' experiences from their own perspective. Instead, such research has gained the views of those who work with them

(i.e. teachers) (Jackson et al., 2021). Therefore, my key goal was to use my doctoral thesis opportunity to offer something back to the TLSA community, where I had travelled from, as they are a key group who work tirelessly for the benefit of young people and our settings, despite the challenges that the findings of this research project highlight.

I was mindful that I brought my previous experiences with me to the research process and I could not easily disentangle how these would influence how I made sense of the data gathered. To support me to be aware of how my beliefs, biases and other influences might be impacting on this work, I kept a reflective diary (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Nadin & Cassell, 2006) and engaged with regular supervision to ensure that I was actively reflecting on my position throughout the research journey (Appendix A). This process also supported my transparency which ensured that my research was of good quality (Lorelli et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke (2021) highlighted the importance of reflecting beyond simply *what* happened and elevating this to consider how the experience made me *feel.*

During both my analysis, and whilst facilitating the peer support groups, it was interesting to reflect on how the participants seemed to share similar experiences to the reality that I had constructed when working in the role of a TLSA. I particularly connected with the influence that the relationships with colleagues had on my well-being and, in addition, the key importance of the connections that I had with the children. Similar to how I have conceptualised the findings within the write up in Chapter 3, within my own experiences, I felt that these factors contributed to my sense of fulfilment and, secondly, fuelled my perceived ability to flourish. Engaging in regular supervision enabled me to interact with my supervisors and co-construct the themes that I formed through the iterative process of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Regular supervision and opportunities to reflect also ensured that I was not solely projecting my own experiences onto the data but, instead, holding my experiences in mind whilst ensuring that I was influenced by the data gathered through the survey. This process helped me to connect with the voices of the participants to actively engage in the 'sense making' process of thematic analysis.

Whilst conducting this research, I had ongoing professional relationships as a Trainee Educational Psychologist with the SLTs within the two school settings involved in Study 2's peer support group element of the research and this often brought up tensions for me. These tensions arose as I was aware of the challenges that the SLT were facing and constraints that existed but, simultaneously, held in mind the negative impact that such factors were having on the TLSAs. I tried to ensure that I offered a space for the TLSAs that was supportive, as positive as genuinely possible and tried to support them to consider solutions to challenges they were encountering which were likely to be implementable. The tension that I experienced during these groups was similar to other experiences that I have had whilst being in the role of a Trainee Educational Psychologist where I have concurrently upheld the values and practices of the Educational Psychology Service that I have been placed in, along with my own views which have, on occasion, differed to the views of those who I have been working with.

With respect to my systematic literature review (SLR), I noted that my past experiences meant that I had observed various approaches and practices that TLSAs adopt in their practice to support children. In addition, I have been fortunate to have informally heard some children and young people's views about their experiences of TLSA support. It is due to the learning I gained from my past roles that I felt particularly inspired to delve into the existing literature base and find out more about what wider research had identified about children's experiences of TLSA support. I hoped that by researching what exists and synthesising this, I would be able to offer a digestible research paper that could inform future practice so that optimal experiences can be had by children, young people and the TLSAs. I soon realised that, in a similar way to which TLSAs' voices are often missing from the literature, there was also a very limited literature base which directly explored children's views of the TLSA support they receive. For example, in the early stages of the scoping searches for my SLR, I investigated the wider literature base and found that the views of teachers' perceptions of working with TLSAs (Jackson et al., 2021) had been synthesised

through a literature review. However, detrimentally, the same had not been done for children and young people who, arguably, are the key stakeholders in TLSA support.

**1.5 Challenges encountered in the research and key learning for me, as a researcher and Trainee Educational Psychologist**

Some challenges were encountered whilst carrying out this research; I found it helpful to document how I navigated these in my reflective log (Appendix B). One particular challenge encountered was that of online bots. After a day of sharing the survey online, I was pleased to have received over 200 responses. Unfortunately, after checking these I noticed that they all had very similar or identical responses such as *'Experiencing a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in my job performance'* and *'Positive: The sense of fulfilment derived from helping students overcome obstacles or achieve academic success outweighs any challenges I may encounter in my role'.* In addition, some responses shared the same IP address. However, I was mindful that if members of staff had completed the survey via the same internet IP address (i.e., in the same school building) this would occur. Therefore, I ensured that I hand checked the entirety of each dataset to look for similarities rather than flagging datasets solely on their IP address. In addition, I checked the postcodes that participants gave for the school that they worked in and noticed that a number of these similar responses gave postcodes which did not correlate with a school area or were non-existent postcodes; a total of 226 datasets were deemed to be bots and were removed. Having reflected on why the bot responses may have occurred, I quickly realised that this is a common challenge for research which offers an incentive for participation and I was openly offering participants a chance to win a monetary voucher as a thank you for their time. Consequently, I looked into effective ways to reduce bot responses and learnt about the usefulness of embedding a CAPTCHA into my survey (Loebenberg et al., 2023). After doing this, the number of bot responses dramatically reduced. A key learning point from this experience was that, in future online research, to reduce the likelihood of false responses, I should embed a CAPTCHA and to not broadcast the prize draw as overtly as I had.

In relation to the framing of some of the questions within the questionnaire (in particular, questions 16 and 17), when designing the research, I was mindful of the time commitment that participants would need to give to complete the research. I, therefore, hoped to scaffold the questions as much as possible to reduce the demand upon the participants. Whilst I feel that my wording enabled participants to more easily infer what I was asking, it could be said that my choice of phrasing influenced people to say 'yes' as I asked if schools had decreased the frequency of interventions (both SEMH and academic-related support). It may have been better for me to first ask whether the frequency had changed and then followed this with a question that asked if this had increased or decreased. Dividing this question into two parts may have reduced the risk of influencing participants' subconscious interpretation of the question and the subsequent decision that they made in response (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

Another challenge encountered related to the facilitation of the peer support groups. I was fortunate to be able to work in two schools which were quite different in regard to how the staff were supported. Within one school, I found myself needing to advocate for the TLSAs on almost every visit as I would arrive and they would not have been covered by another member of staff for our session. This meant that they would be trying to identify how they could access my session whilst causing minimal disruption to their assigned classes. This impacted the groups as we often spent time reflecting on the challenges that they were encountering with cover for the sessions and this would often then lead to reflection about the wider challenges with the staff team. Therefore, whilst the space was designed to reflect on challenges and successes in their daily TLSA experience, it seemed that one of the key challenges that arose was linked to the peer support groups themselves.

As well as challenges, I experienced a number of positive learning experiences from my thesis project. One key learning point, across both my empirical and SLR research, has been developing my appreciation of the integral importance of gathering views of service users and stakeholders. Having synthesised the literature of children's views about their

experiences of working with TLSAs, I have become even more aware of the importance of asking children what they think about their school experience and ensuring that I, and other practitioners, offer a psychologically safe space for them to feel as safe and comfortable as possible.

In addition, having supported TLSAs through peer support groups, I have further developed my knowledge by hearing what it is like to be employed in a role where you feel unheard and undervalued. Finally, I was privileged to hear the TLSAs' views about potential ways forward for situations that felt stuck within their respective schools. During these conversations, I appreciated the attendees' abilities to articulate potential ways forward that may lead to positive change and felt a sense of frustration with them as they perceived that their ideas would not be valued as they were in the position of a TLSA. The findings of my research, together with the thesis itself, offer a platform from which I can empower TLSAs' voices to be heard and valued – a point that I will also champion in my own future practice as an Educational Psychologist.

Concerning the write up of the research, a particular consideration that I deliberated was the use of acronyms. Whilst acronyms can serve as a useful way of keeping sentences concise and supporting the flow for the reader, I spoke with my primary supervisor about the use of these, particularly for 'children and young people'. In an early draft, I had referred to the children and young people as 'CYP'; however, it was felt that this was depersonalising. As a result, it was decided to interchangeably use the full terminology. Conversely, for 'TLSAs', I grappled with how I felt about not honouring TLSAs in the same way. However, it was decided that as there were many potential name variations for 'TLSAs' (i.e., teaching assistant, learning support assistants and learning mentors, to name only a few). Whereas, in comparison, 'children and young people' is thought to be the correct terminology for the individuals that I was referring to. Notably, there is a wide range of job role titles for TLSAs and, consequently, I did not want to lose the nuance of these by continually referring to the group as one particular name, such as 'teaching assistants'. As a result, I decided that

abbreviating TLSAs was not disrespectful but, instead, hopefully perceived as respectful as it clearly encapsulated two of the most commonly employed role titles 'teaching assistant' and 'learning support assistant' and hopefully comes across as a flexible term which will also welcome other role titles (e.g., learning mentors etc.) to feel welcomed by the phrase.

Throughout the research journey, I was fortunate to have the support of two Voluntary Research Assistants (VRAs); one of whom was in Year 2 and the other in Year 3 of their Undergraduate Psychology degree. Having opportunities to support these individuals was invaluable for my own personal and professional development as I was able to learn more about the appropriate delegation of research-related tasks and develop my knowledge of how to explain and share relevant information to support the VRAs to complete the activities set (e.g., how to search databases and screen papers using the set search terms). I also found it helpful to reflect on some of the wonders I held as an undergraduate about research and, therefore, ensure that I shared the rationale for the research, how to use the various databases and software and explained the purpose of SLRs and empirical research. I continually aimed to mitigate any power imbalance by regularly offering the VRAs the opportunity to ask questions and acknowledging when I would need to seek support from my supervisor as I had reached the limits of my own knowledge and competence. I hope they feel that they gained knowledge and skills relating to the process of research, as my hope was to offer them support to help navigate their future research endeavours. In addition, the VRA from Year 3 of their Undergraduate course utilised a range of the quantitative data that I collected from Study 1 for their dissertation project. Within their dissertation, they aimed to answer a research question relating to whether specific school characteristics or working patterns were associated with increased well-being among TLSAs. This undergraduate project was also supervised by my primary supervisor.

**1.6 Dissemination plan**

The initial findings of this research have already been shared with an Educational Psychology Service in the South of England in December 2024. I am also sharing the

empirical element of this thesis at the University of Southampton's Postgraduate Research conference in June 2025 and the International School Psychology Association (ISPA) conference in July 2025. I also hope to be able to share my research with the Educational Psychology Service that I will be employed in from September 2025.

I intend to aim to publish the empirical chapter in the British Education Research Journal (BERJ). I have chosen the BERJ as it aims to publish research relating to key educational issues and is noted to be a key journal for education research of international interest. Given that TLSAs are present across schools globally, it is arguable that this will be useful for a range of education professionals and researchers internationally. In addition, the BERJ values lengthier research pieces, such as my own extended project, which requires space to provide rich detail from participant voices.

Secondly, I would like to try to publish my systematic literature review (SLR) in the International Journal of Inclusive Education as this journal aims to publish research which promotes inclusion within education and supports educators and education policymakers. Importantly, this journal holds the premise that being enrolled in an education setting is not enough to warrant an accurate measure of inclusion for children and this aligns with my own views about how we need to ensure that their views are heard and acted upon accordingly. Furthermore, this journal strives to publish research that increases knowledge about policy and practice to increase options for children and young people. Given that my SLR aims to highlight the importance of gathering such views about the support they engage with from TLSAs, this seems like an appropriate match.

Finally, it is important for me to share this research with the TLSAs themselves, as this research is for them. I hope that sharing the key findings may offer TLSAs, both those who participated and those who were not actively involved with this research for whatever reason, a sense of connection to the wider TLSA community as they may share similar experiences. I hope that all individuals who do come across this research gain a sense of feeling valued and cared-for as that is one of my key hopes for this incredibly dedicated

group of school staff. I am mindful that reaching SLTs is also likely to be key in order for the recommendations to be actioned and implemented. To support usability of this research within school settings, I have created a resource that TLSAs can utilise in a range of ways (i.e., with a TLSA peer, member of SLT or Educational Psychologist). It will be key that SLT are aware of the resource and embed it as a tool and approach to supporting and reflecting on TLSAs' well-being. So far, I have created the resource (Appendix C) which I plan on sharing with schools settings from September 2025. To enhance the likelihood of TLSAs and other school staff, such as SLTs, becoming aware of the research findings and resource that I have created, I am going to condense the findings into an infographic alongside a downloadable version of the resource which I hope to share on social media platforms such as X and LinkedIn.

**Chapter 2 Exploring Children and Young People's views and Perceptions of Teaching Assistants, Learning Support Assistants and Similar Roles – a systematic review and thematic synthesis.**

## 2.1. Abstract

Children and young people are the primary recipients of teaching and learning support assistant (TLSA) provision; however, their perspectives on this engagement are currently underrepresented within the literature base. Given the emphasis in early key and existing policy (e.g., Every Child Matters Green paper, 2003) and academic literature about the value of service user feedback, this highlights a noteworthy omission. Consequently, this systematic literature review aims to form an understanding of children and young people's views about TLSA support by synthesising the available research. Notably, the existing literature in this topic area is limited; therefore, this review utilises research that involved children and young people, as well as adults, who were retrospectively reflecting on their school-based experiences of engaging with TLSA support.

Nineteen papers were identified for inclusion. Through the process of Thematic Synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), four descriptive themes were formed: *children and young people desire to have a voice, TLSAs' positionality within school, the weight of TLSA support,* and *classroom heroes*. The children generally expressed a desire to voice their feelings about the support they engage with. Some noted TLSA support as key to their academic success – these perceptions suggested that TLSAs could be likened to heroes. The attunement between TLSAs and children appeared to influence the effectiveness of support; responsive and adaptable TLSAs resulted in positive experiences. In contrast, when such attunement did not occur, the support seemed to be a heavy weight. In addition, it was noted that

children perceived TLSAs to hold a multifaceted role in the school community.

The results from this SLR are considered alongside existing research, particularly literature focussing on the value of incorporating stakeholders' views. Strengths, limitations and implications for practice are explored. These include acknowledging the culturally limited sample of papers and the somewhat dated research that was included. In addition, the importance of ensuring that plentiful opportunities are available to children and young people to share their views is stated.

**2.2 Introduction**

***The Role of Teaching and Learning Support Assistants***

TLSAs were once deployed to mainly support with administrative duties relating to the classroom, such as preparing learning activities and resources (Tarry & Cox, 2013). However, they are now more actively involved in the teaching and learning elements of schooling (Tews & Lupart, 2008). Early changes to the TLSA role were shaped by legislative introductions such as the Education Act 2002 and Every Child Matters Green paper (2003). These two key legislative documents transformed the role of 'classroom assistants', from assistants primarily involved in preparation activities, to being much more involved with teaching and learning in mainstream schooling and supporting inclusion for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Initially, following the introduction of the aforementioned legislation, TLSAs were perceived as essential for one-to-one support for children with SEND as these practices were believed to be an inclusion solution (Blatchford et al., 2011). More recently, a substantial body of research has sought to enhance understanding of the effectiveness of TLSA deployment and its overall impact with the goal of optimising effectiveness (Blatchford et al., 2011; Skipp & Hopwood, 2019; Webster, 2024).

The largest research study into TLSA deployment within UK schools involved two strands, one of which involved gathering questionnaire data at three time points: 2004, 2006 and 2008. The gathered data included information from approximately 20,000 TLSAs about their employment conditions, experiences and levels of training. The second wave of the research involved observations and interviews with support staff, teachers and senior leadership members across eighteen case study schools in the UK. Furthermore, there was analysis of around 2,000 conversation transcripts from interactions between children and support staff (Blatchford et al., 2009). This research reported that TLSAs spent a large amount of their time in a direct pedagogical role. The findings also indicated that pupils who engaged with TLSAs for the greatest proportion of time were identified to make the least

academic progress compared to similarly able peers who received less support. Importantly, through this mixed methods approach, Blatchford et al. (2009) argued that it was not necessarily what the TLSAs were doing but rather how they were being deployed and utilised within school settings which led to the less positive outcomes.

As a result of this research, concerns were raised about the potentially detrimental impact that TLSA deployment and support could have on children's schooling experience and long-term outcomes. Later research by Bosanquet and Radford (2019) identified a key difference in the support offered by TLSAs. This observed difference was that individuals working in the TLSA role were observed to focus on task completion rather than developing children's understanding of the concept being taught; this was also identified in Blatchford and colleagues' (2009) earlier research. One potential hypothesis for this finding could be that TLSAs may have less knowledge about how to scaffold learning compared to teachers due to the differences in their training. These differences to task approach could be hypothesised to be linked to TLSAs' potentially holding perceptions that task completion is of upmost importance. Supporting this second hypothesis is research by Bowles and colleagues (2018) which identified that TLSAs had a range of knowledge about relational and emotional support but reported gaps in their skillset in relation to fostering independence with children's academic learning. An earlier notable recommendation made by Blatchford and colleagues (2011) mirrored Bowles and colleagues' (2018) research as they identified that TLSAs needed to alter their approaches to encourage pupil independence rather than fostering children's reliance on adult support.

Whilst research has identified challenges and subsequent changes that were needed in practice, the valuable contributions that TLSAs brought to the classroom were also recognised (Blatchford et al., 2011). These benefits included TLSAs' ability to form positive and meaningful working relationships and their skills at offering emotional and behavioural support for children.

In addition to academic learning support, TLSAs often help children with their social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) and have a wealth of knowledge about such approaches (Bowles et al., 2018). Such support may be provided informally (e.g., supporting children in the moment when they are emotionally dysregulated or supporting them with skills and understanding concepts such as friendships). Alternatively, SEMH support may be offered more formally through interventions for which TLSAs have received targeted training. Findings by Krause et al., (2020), utilising semi-structured interviews and a thematic synthesis, spotlight this. Their findings suggested a range of positive outcomes for children when they were supported by TLSAs trained as Emotional Literacy Support Assistants. The benefits for the children were noted by a range of key people, including school staff, family, friends and peers, highlighting the positive impact that TLSAs can have on children's SEMH.

### TLSAs as wider community support

Other research has brought attention to the additional support that TLSAs offered during the COVID-19 pandemic as they became an integral connection between school and home for children, young people and their families during this time. Throughout this global health emergency (World Health Organisation, 2023), TLSAs were fundamental to the continuation of successful schooling for many children and young people. Moss et al. (2021) surveyed 9,055 TLSAs and identified that, during the pandemic, 36% of TLSAs liaised with families and offered support to pupils who were encountering challenges with home learning, arguably, to minimise inequity. The tasks that TLSAs were carrying out (e.g., facilitating home visits) could be said to fall outside the parameters of their job role; research has acknowledged this by likening the role to that of 'welfare and family support' (Hall & Webster, 2023). Given the wide range of support that TLSAs offer to the wider school community in addition to the children, it is unsurprising that research has documented that people within the roles are 'intermediaries between home and school life' (Alborz et al., 2009). Furthermore, as TLSAs have been known to identify as coming from the society in which the

school serve, they have described themselves as 'interpersonal glue' between the teachers and school communities (Watson et al., 2013).

Taken together, the research reviewed suggests that TLSAs play a significant role in holistically supporting children and the wider school communities. However, the findings regarding the effectiveness and impact of such support, particularly in relation to academic learning, remain mixed. Over time, the TLSA role has evolved, shaped by both legislative and political developments as well as research findings. Notably, much of this research has focused on the perspectives of school staff (CFE Research, 2024) but limited attention has been given to the voices of children. Whilst the staff perspectives are undoubtedly valuable, a systematic understanding of how children themselves experience and perceive TLSA support is lacking. Given that children and young people are the primary recipients of this support, capturing their perceptions and how they feel about their interactions with TLSAs is essential, not only for assessing the impact of TLSAs but also to better understand how their support influences children's motivation, engagement, and emotional responses. Exploring children's experiences of TLSA support in relation to learning, school engagement, social experiences and well-being could offer important insights to inform future policy and practice.

***The importance of Children and Young People's views***

Within Article 12 of the Treaty of The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the importance of asking children about their views when making decisions that affect them is clearly stated. Furthermore, the Children and Families Act (2014) made it a statutory requirement for children and their families to be involved, and partake, in decision-making which is likely to impact their lives. With respect to support for SEND, this includes, but is not limited to, Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs). Moreover, the Children and Families Act (2014) highlights the importance of child-centred approaches being adopted across services that support children.
There have been a wealth of benefits highlighted in relation to utilising children's voices for

informing service delivery and research. A systematic review that synthesised the literature on the role and impact of involving children (aged 15 and under) in academic research processes (i.e., as co-researchers) found a wealth of benefits, including increased agency, well-being, ownership and sense of empowerment for the participants (Bakhtiar et al., 2023). Unfortunately, to date, children's active participation in research relating to their experiences with adults in education is somewhat limited. In 2011, the Children's Commissioner (Chamberlain et al., 2011), carried out research into views on education policy and part of this research involved asking children ($n$ = 2,004) about their experiences with teachers. This identified that children felt more confident about teachers being able to help and support them rather than managing disruptive behaviour. However, what the term 'support' meant within the context of this research was not clearly defined; it could be that the children felt that teachers were able to support and scaffold their learning, rather than just offer them answers, or it could be that the children perceived that the teacher's job was to support learning, rather than manage behaviour. Therefore, this research finding left the question of who children perceived as helping manage disruptive behaviour within the class unanswered. Through this research, children also identified a range of inter- and intra-personal factors which they felt were important characteristics for teachers (e.g., good subject knowledge, being able to support pupils and manage bullying). Given the important insights gained when children have their voice heard in matters which directly affect them, (e.g., their perceptions about teacher characteristics they value) it is somewhat surprising that children's views have not been studied more extensively in relation to how they feel about TLSAs approaches as for some children, this is their predominant form of support.

### *This Current Research*

Considering the limited attention on children's views in previous research, along with best practice advancements and broader recognition of the importance of pupil voice in educational practice, it would be immensely valuable to better understand how children

perceive and experience support from TLSAs. While some published individual studies have explored children's views on schooling and, more specifically, their experiences with TLSAs, there has been no systematic synthesis of this literature base.

This SLR aims to address this gap by bringing together existing studies, which include children's and adult's (who were retrospectively reflecting) voices, to develop a clearer understanding of their lived experiences of engaging with TLSAs in primary and secondary school settings. By focusing on the participants' views, this review seeks to highlight how, from their perspectives, interactions with TLSAs shape the participants' learning, social relationships, classroom engagement, autonomy and overall school experience.

## 2.3 Methodology

### 2.3.1 Selection and search strategy

A systematic search was conducted following the PRISMA (Page et al., 2021) guidelines, guided by the SPIDER framework (Table 1) (Cooke et al., 2012) to ensure robustness in both systematic literature search and qualitative synthesis. Thoroughness in reporting was guided by the ENTREQ statement (Tong et al., 2012) for systematic literature reviews of qualitative studies (Appendix D). A protocol for this review was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework (please see: https://osf.io/ngmuv).

**Table 1**

*The SPIDER Framework for Study Selection*

| | |
|---|---|
| **S -** Sample | Children and young people or adults |
| **PI** –Phenomenon of Interest | Children and young people's or adults' perceptions, views, and lived experience of Teaching Assistants, Learning Support Assistants or equivalent adults in their class. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **D** – Design | Interviews, focus groups and ethnographic observations. |
| **E** – Evaluation | The views and perceptions of children, young people or adults reflecting on their experiences with Teaching Assistants, Learning Support Assistants or equivalent adults in their class. |
| **R** – Research Type | Qualitative studies and mixed methods research (only the qualitative data will be extracted). |

Three electronic databases were searched: APA PsycInfo, ERIC and Scopus. The search terms and Boolean operators were adapted as necessary to each database and are shown in Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Terms and Boolean Operators Used in Search*

| Interface/Platform | Search Terms |
|---|---|
| APA PsycInfo | Child* OR adolescent* OR youth OR teen* OR pupil*<br>AND view* OR opinion* OR perception* OR perceive*<br>AND 'learning support assistant*' OR 'teach* assistant' OR 'supportive adult*'<br>OR 'support* staff' OR 'non-teach* staff'<br>OR 'non-teach* adult' OR 'education* assistant*' OR 'TA' OR 'LSA'<br>AND 'primary school' OR 'secondary school' OR 'high school' OR 'elementary school' OR |

| | |
|---|---|
| | 'junior school' OR 'infant school' OR 'middle school' OR 'education setting' |
| ERIC | Child* OR adolescent* OR youth OR teen* OR pupil* <br><br> AND view* OR opinion* OR perception* OR perceive* <br><br> AND 'learning support assistant*' OR 'teach* assistant' OR 'supportive adult*' <br><br> OR 'support* staff' OR 'non-teach* staff' <br><br> OR 'non-teach* adult' OR 'education* assistant*' OR 'TA' OR 'LSA' <br><br> AND 'primary school' OR 'secondary school' OR 'high school' OR 'elementary school' OR 'junior school' OR 'infant school' OR 'middle school' OR 'education setting' |
| Scopus | (child* OR adolescent* OR youth OR teen* OR pupil*) AND <br> (view* OR opinion* OR perception* OR perceive*) AND ("learning support assistant*" OR "teach* assistant" OR "supportive adult*" OR "support* staff" OR "non-teach* staff" OR "non-teach* adult" OR "education* assistant*" OR "ta" OR "lsa") AND ("primary school" OR "secondary school" OR "high school" OR "elementary school" OR "junior school" OR "infant school" OR "middle school" OR "education setting") |

During the initial scoping searches, it became evident that the body of literature relating to the phenomenon of interest was quite limited; therefore, date parameters for publications were not set so that all relevant and available papers would be sought and

considered for inclusion within the literature review. The systematic search was conducted on 24th July 2024, repeated on 3rd February 2025 and 21st May 2025; 18 papers were identified in the first search and one additional paper was found in the third search.

### 2.3.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

All identified records were saved as Research Information Systems (.ris) files for each of the database searches and imported to Rayyan ($n$ = 2,227) for screening and removal of duplicates. The titles and abstracts of the remaining papers were screened using the inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

| Inclusion criteria | Exclusion criteria |
| --- | --- |
| Papers that involve gathering the views of children and young people between the ages of 3-25 or adults above 25 years of age | Papers that have exclusively gathered the views of adults (e.g., teachers, parents or senior leadership teams in schools). |
| Papers that involve children and young people or adults reflecting on their experiences with TLSAs (or equivalent job roles under different titles) in an educational context e.g., primary, secondary or equivalent educational settings. | Papers that are analysing the views of young people about TLSA (or equivalent job roles under different titles) support in College and university. |
| Papers must be related to children and young people's or adults' views about TLSAs (or equivalent job roles under different titles) | Papers that are not empirical (e.g., literature reviews and meta-analyses). |

| | |
|---|---|
| Papers must have gathered the views of participants through interviews, surveys, focus groups or other appropriate methods. | Papers that do not focus on gathering children and young people's or adults' views about their perceptions and experiences of TLSAs (or equivalent job roles under different titles). |
| Papers must be peer-reviewed empirical studies | Papers that gather participants' views about adults who are not in a TA or equivalent role. |
| Papers must be available in English. | Papers that are not available in English. |

A systematic search was conducted using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) approach (Page et al., 2021), as shown in Figure 1. Overall, the search returned 2,227 results. 390 duplicates were removed. 1,837 titles of the papers were screened for relevance to the systematic literature review topic. After screening the titles, 1,750 papers were removed as they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Of the remaining 87 papers, title and abstracts were screened for inclusion, resulting in the removal of a further 72 papers. The remaining papers were then read fully to assess their suitability for inclusion. This left 15 papers included for review, which were assessed using a quality assurance framework (see Appendix E). Combined, two undergraduate voluntary research assistants (VRAs) screened a total of 200 titles (10.89% of all the papers returned by the initial database searches which were not deemed to be duplicates) and abstracts against the inclusion/exclusion criteria. No discrepancies in relation to whether papers should be included or excluded were identified at the part of this counterchecking.

In addition to the initial search strategy, hand-searching of the reference lists of included papers was conducted. An additional three papers were identified to meet the inclusion criteria through this method. Another database search was conducted in February 2025 to identify any additional papers. Following this, an informal internet search identified a

paper which had been published after the initial search was conducted in August 2024 and had not been returned by the February 2025 search. This paper contained two additional words which explained why it had not been picked up in the initial two searches. Therefore, the researcher felt that it would be important to update the search terms and, subsequently, another search was carried out in May 2025. This final search identified one additional paper (the one that was identified in the informal search) meaning that the final number of included studies for this review was 19.

**Figure 1**

*Systematic search strategy using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Approach (Page et al., 2021).*
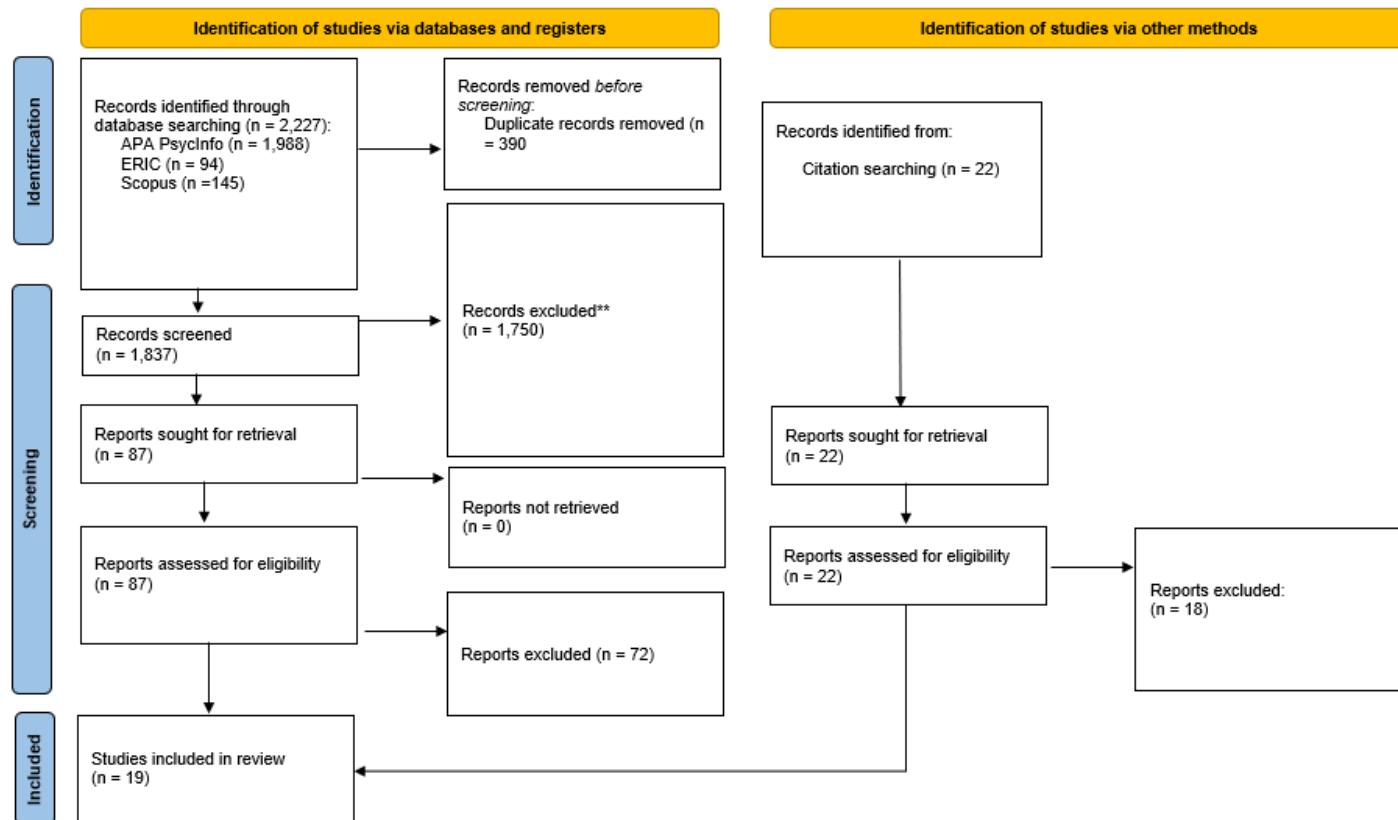
## 2.4 Data extraction and critical appraisal

### 2.4.1 Quality Assurance

The primary researcher carried out quality assurance for all 19 papers and two supporting VRAs carried out quality assurance on a combined total of ten papers (approximately 52.63% of the total sample of papers which had met the inclusion criteria). This enabled the main researcher to look for consistency and discrepancies in the appraisals of the papers and ensure that the final appraisal was fair and in line with that of the other researchers. The quality of the 19 papers were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) (2024), checklist for qualitative research. The CASP was chosen as it offers a framework comprised of ten questions, which support researchers to critically evaluate the results, reliability and usefulness of research and is of particular popularity within the social science and healthcare research fields (Long et al., 2020). Whilst the CASP does not have a scoring system for the papers, a score of 0-2 (0 corresponding to 'No', 1 'Unsure' and 2 'Yes') was attributed to each of the questions to help show the differences in the strengths of the respective research papers (Appendix F). The purpose of the quality assurance process was to gain insight into the methodological rigour; however, notably, the scores attributed did not impact the likelihood of them being included within the review. Furthermore, nor did the attributed individual score impact on how much each paper was utilised within the synthesis. This methodological choice was made because the researcher strongly valued each participant's response as a recollection of their lived experience and felt that their views should not be lost or utilised less due to the methodological rigour applied by the researcher of the original studies.

Use of a scoring system, as outlined above, enabled the lead researcher to identify similarities and differences in relation to all reviewers' overall appraisals of the papers. Discrepancies arose in relation to the numerical score attributed to the individual sections of

the CASP for 8 of the 10 reviewed papers, the greatest variance in the score attributed between the researchers was a total of four points. The differences in numerical scoring were discussed and, given that the scores did not impact whether papers were included within the review, the differences were retained to reflect the variability in the interpretations made. This decision was chosen as it highlights the subjective nature of assessing qualitative research, demonstrating how the researchers' prior experiences and knowledge of the subject area can, arguably, influence how they assess available information.

Across the papers, there was variation in the methodological rigour identified. The scores attributed ranged from 12 to 20 ($M$ = 15.70). One paper was assessed to be worthy of the highest score of 20 points, 8 papers scored 18-19 points, 4 papers scored 16-17 points, 3 papers scored 14-15 points and the remaining 3 papers were noted to have scores below 15. It was considered if the differences in the transparency of reporting could be due to different journal requirements and the times of publication.

In addition to the CASP (2024), the lead researcher carried out data extraction for all 19 papers (Appendix G) and the VRAs completed this for a total of 10 papers (52.63% of the total dataset). This data extraction involved gathering specific information on the research aims, participant information, data collection method, analysis approach, main themes and findings and the quality assurance rating. This enabled the researcher to check for inconsistencies in the data extracted and ensure identification and rectification of any errors that may have occurred due to factors such as fatigue.

**2.4.2 Data synthesis**

The 19 papers were analysed using thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Initially, meta-ethnography was explored as an approach to synthesis. However, after researching this approach further, it was identified that this method of synthesis lends itself well to forming new conceptual understandings (Noblit & Hare, 1988) and theory generation (France et al., 2019). These two benefits of meta-ethnography were not the primary goals of

this current review as this synthesis aimed to develop a better understanding of children and young people's views and this did not require a conceptual or theory-driven understanding to be developed (Thomas & Harden, 2008). In addition, meta-ethnography requires rich data from all studies included and, within this SLR, some papers did not contain the richness that would have been needed to effectively carry out the meta-ethnography approach (France et al., 2019).

After careful consideration, a thematic synthesis approach was employed as it enabled inductive and interpretive analysis (Boland, Cherry & Dickson, 2017). This approach enabled the researcher to form their own interpretations about the data that the original researchers had gathered. Thematic synthesis offers a clear process which supports replicability (Borenstein et al., 2009; Grant & Booth, 2009) and allows for diverse studies to be included which was useful in this research as the ages of participants were relatively varied. Furthermore, Thomas and Harden (2008) report that the approach is particularly useful for informing policy and practice due to the process requiring researchers to go beyond the surface of the data utilised to form a new understanding. Indeed, generating knowledge to inform future practice was a key aim of this review.

This approach involved the researcher bringing together the data from the included papers to form descriptive and analytical themes based on the data within the papers and then, from this, formulate analytical themes to specifically answer the research question for this review: *What are the lived experiences of children and young people engaging with TLSAs in primary and secondary school settings concerning their learning, social relationships, classroom engagement, autonomy and overall school experience*? Thematic synthesis involved interpretation which aligned with the researcher's constructivist epistemological position. Constructivism reflects the view that knowledge is constructed through individuals interacting with the world around them and their interpretations of such experience (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Within this SLR, the researcher held a central role

in interpreting and forming themes and knowledge through their experiences of interacting with and interpreting the data. These interpretations would have been influenced by the researcher's own experiences which they brought with them to the research (see Chapter 1 for more information on researcher positionality).

NVivo™ 15 was utilised to support the coding process and store the data. The entirety of the papers were imported into NVivo 15, however, only the results sections of all 19 papers were used in the thematic synthesis. The researcher chose to solely code the raw data within the papers so that they could apply their own interpretations to the data without being confined to the predefined themes set out by the original researchers. A three-stage thematic synthesis approach was used for this analysis, following Thomas and Harden's (2008) paper. Stage one of the process involved coding the data. All the raw data was given at least one code. This part of the coding process was iterative; the codes were revisited, refined and altered as the researcher became more familiar with the data and how it could answer the research question. This process resulted in 88 codes. Stage two of the process involved sorting the codes into groups and this led to the formation of nine descriptive themes. Stage three involved moving beyond the descriptive themes and considering these within the context of the research question of *What are the lived experiences of children and young people engaging with TLSAs in primary and secondary school settings concerning their learning, social relationships, classroom engagement, autonomy and overall school experience?.* From this, four analytical themes were developed to report the participants' views and lived experiences with TLSAs: *children and young people desire to have a voice, TLSAs' positionality with school, the weight of TLSA support* and *classroom heroes*. A representation of how the descriptive themes were categorised into the analytical themes is shown in Appendix H.

### 2.4.3 Characteristics of included studies

Nineteen qualitative research papers were included in this systematic literature review.

These papers were published between 1997 and 2024 and all involved qualitative research methods. All of the research was conducted across a range of Western countries meaning that a range of views from participants across different countries have been considered: United Kingdom ($n = $ 11), Belgium ($n = $ 1), Sweden ($n = $ 1), the United States of America ($n = $ 1), Australia ($n = $ 1), the Republic of Ireland ($n = $ 1), Canada ($n = $ 1), Iceland ($n = $ 1) and New Zealand ($n = $ 1). Notably, some of these papers interviewed TLSAs, class teachers and parents in addition to children and young people or adults reflecting on their experiences as a child who had engaged with TLSA support; however, only the views of the children or adults reflecting on their experiences as a child were extracted and included within this literature review. Across the 19 studies, a total of 1,467 voices from children, young people and adults (reflecting retrospectively) on their experiences with TLSAs were considered (participant n ranged from 3 to 718 across studies). Eighteen papers noted that the school settings participants were reflecting about were either mainstream primary or secondary schools. One paper did not specify the school type but involved participants between the ages of 8 - 19 years so met the inclusion criteria as it was highly likely that these participants would have been reflecting on their experiences in statutory education.

Eight of the papers did not specify whether the participants had a special educational need, whereas, in the other 11 papers, participants were noted to have a range of needs such as physical disabilities including spina bifida, Prader-Wili and Down syndrome. Other individuals were identified as neurodivergent or as having a cognition and learning-related special educational need.

Participants involved within the respective papers were between the ages of three and thirty years of age. The wide age range was chosen to enable inclusion of studies ($n = 3$) (Broer et al., 2005; Ktenidis, 2023; Tews & Lupart, 2008) where adult participants reflected on their experiences within statutory education settings. Given that the availability of literature specifically gathering children and young people's views is limited, it was felt that

enabling inclusion of papers which gathered adult's retrospective views about their

experiences of TLSA support would broaden the number of views considered for this

research and enable wider research-informed knowledge to be generated from this review.

**Table 4**

*Overview of Included Studies*

| Paper title | Author(s) and country in which the research was carried out | Participant information | Aims | Methodology used to gather the participant's views | Score given (using CASP questions) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Supporting special needs in the mainstream classroom: children's perceptions of the adult role. | Bowers (1997)<br><br>United Kingdom | 713 children took part.<br><br>*n* = 70 (5-7 years of age),<br><br>*n* = 515 (7-11 years of age).<br><br>No identification of gender or SEN was provided. | To determine the reasons that children gave for the explanation of additional adults in the classroom and explore whether these explanations embraced need on part of a child or children' or whether the 'need' was viewed as being on the teacher. | Group and one-to-one interviews | 13 |
| My Assistant and I: disabled children's and adolescents' roles and relationships to their assistants | Skär & Tamm (2010)<br><br>Sweden | 13 children and adolescents took part. they were between the ages of 8 and 19 years of age.<br><br>Participants had a diagnosis of spina bifida, muscular dystrophy and/or rheumatic illness. | The aim was to describe how children and adolescents with restricted mobility perceive their assistant and focus on the roles and relationships they have towards one another, and how the presence of an assistant | One-to-one semi-structured interviews | 19 |

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| | | | influences the participants' peer contacts. | | |
| Perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities about their experiences with paraprofessional support | Broer et al., (2005)<br><br>United States of America | 16 young adults aged 19-29 years of age (male $n$ = 10, female $n$ = 6).<br><br>Participants were identified to have the mild/moderate 'intellectual disabilities'. In addition to this, some participants also had diagnoses of:<br><br>$n$ = 1 Prader-Willi<br><br>$n$ = 3 Emotional behaviour disorder<br><br>$n$ = 5 Down syndrome. | To find out about service delivery issues to support settings to extend inclusive opportunities for young adults with disabilities in general education classes. It also hoped to develop a better understanding of the impact of paraprofessional support for young people with disabilities and compare priorities and concerns included in the professional literature | Semi-structured interviews | 17 |
| Supporting the inclusion of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in the primary school: the role of teaching assistants | Groom & Rose (2005)<br><br>United Kingdom | 10 pupils between 7-11 years of age.<br><br>No identification of gender or SEN was provided. | To identify factors contributing to effective practice by TAs (teaching assistants) in supporting the inclusion of pupils with Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD). | Semi-structured interviews | 14 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The role of the special needs assistant supporting pupils with special educational needs in Irish mainstream primary schools | Logan (2006) Republic of Ireland | 3 participants of primary school age participated. No identification of gender or SEN was provided. | To answer four research questions; one of which is particularly relevant for this SLR: 'What are the perceptions of pupils, parents, teachers, principals and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) themselves of the role?'., | Structured interviews | 14 |
| Children's views of Teaching Assistants in primary schools | Fraser & Meadows (2008) United Kingdom | 419 children between the ages of 7-11 completed the questionnaire element of the research. 86 (male $n$ = 39, female $n$ = 47) participated in interviews. No identification of the children's needs was provided. | To better understand children's perceptions of TAs with a particular focus on identifying who they perceive to 'teach', be in charge and what TAs do 'to help' children. | Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews | 17 |
| Students with disabilities' perspectives of the role and impact of paraprofessionals in | Tews & Lupart (2008) Canada | 11 students took part: $n$ = 2 (3-6 years), $n$ = 2 (7-12 years) $n$ = 2 (13-17 years) | To further the initial research ideas of Broer et al., (2005). This research aimed to gather the views of students with such disabilities about their experiences with | Semi-structured interviews | 17 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| iInclusive education settings. | | *n* = 2 (18-30 years)<br><br>The conditions participants were diagnosed with:<br><br>*n* = 3 autistic<br><br>*n* = 1 Down syndrome<br><br>*n* = 1 Prader-Willi syndrome<br><br>*n* = 1 brain injury | paraprofessional support whilst they were still in the education context. | | |
| Assistance to pupils with physical disabilities in regular schools: promoting inclusion or creating dependency? | Egilson & Traustadottir (2009)<br><br>Iceland | 14 CYP (male *n* = 9, female *n* = 5)<br><br>Below are the frequency of needs – it is assumed that some young people will have had comorbid needs as the number of needs specified equated to more than the total sample of participants (*n* = 14)<br><br>*n* = 8 Cerebral palsy<br><br>*n* = 2 Myelomeningocele<br><br>*n* = 3 neuromuscular disorders<br><br>*n* = 1 Musculoskeletal disorder<br><br>*n* = 7 specific learning needs | To examine the assistance provided to pupils with physical disabilities within inclusive school settings and identify which factors had the most critical influences on the provision of support. | Semi-structured interviews | 16 |

| | | *n* = 2 alternative communication | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 'Whoops, I forgot David': children's perceptions of the adults who work in their classrooms | Eyres et al., (2010)<br><br>United Kingdom | 78 children between 5 -11 years of age took part. Children were selected equally across year groups so that the sample comprised of a cross-section of primary school ages.<br><br>No identification of gender or SEN was provided. | To find out children's views about the adults in their classrooms. | Interviews | 19 |
| Supports for children with disabilities in regular education classrooms: an account of different perspectives in Flanders | Mortier et al., (2010)<br><br>Belgium | 3 female children were involved in this research between aged between 6-17 years.<br><br>*n* = 2 had cognitive needs<br><br>*n* = 1 had communication and motor needs. | Aimed to answer 'how and why' questions regarding inclusive education practice in a particular cultural education context. This was part of a three-year research effort to investigate facilitating factors and barriers to inclusive education in Flanders. | Semi-structured interviews | 15 |
| Researching the pupil voice: what makes a good teaching assistant? | Bland & Sleightholme (2012) | 28 pupils aged between 10-11 years. | To find out, from pupils, what makes a good teaching assistant including the main personal and professional characteristics and | Questionnaire and written activity. | 11 |

| | United Kingdom | No identification of gender or SEN was provided. | the type of support they hoped for. | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| In, out or somewhere in between? Disabled students' and teacher aides' experiences of school | Rutherford (2012)<br><br>New Zealand | 10 students between 8 - 17 years of age. Gender and/or specific needs were not shared. | To contribute to the emerging body of research about the experiences of disabled students and teacher 'aides' in the New Zealand educational context. | Semi-structured meetings | 15 |
| The dissection of paraprofessional support in inclusive education: 'You're in mainstream with a chaperone' | Whitburn (2013)<br><br>Australia | 5 young people (male $n$ = 4, female $n$ = 1) aged between 8-17 years.<br><br>All participants were legally registered blind and had varying levels of impaired sight. | To investigate the power of the methodology proposed by Dewey that highlighted the need for those who have the possibility of being marginalised to be given opportunities to work towards social advancement and find out about young people (with a visual impairment) experiences of receiving paraprofessional support. | Semi-structured focus groups and individual face-to-face interviews. | 20 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The views of children and parents towards Higher Level Teaching Assistants who teach whole classes | Williams & O'Connor (2012) United Kingdom | 48 children (male $n$ = 24, female $n$ = 24) from Key Stage 2 across 8 different schools. The children's needs were not disclosed. | To find out from children and parents about the impact of the workforce remodelling agenda about HLTAs teaching whole classes. | Interviews | 18 |
| Understanding the role of the Teaching Assistant: Comparing the views of pupils with SEN and TAs within mainstream primary schools | Wren (2017) United Kingdom | 11 pupils (male $n$ = 8, female $n$ = 3) aged 6-7 years. Notably, 15 pupils were learning English as an additional language (EAL). All had a SEN 'Statement'. $n$ = 10 had social communication needs as an area of need of the Statement, all had at least 15 hours of scheduled TLSA support per week. | Explore pupils' and TLSAs' perspectives of the TLSA role within mainstream settings to see the similarities/differences between the two groups perspectives. | Semi-structured interviews and drawing activities | 18 |
| Making sense of 'teaching', 'support' and 'differentiation': the educational experiences of pupils | Webster & Blatchford (2018) United Kingdom | 49 pupils aged 13-14 years. Participants were identified as having 'high level' SEND. 82% of the participants had a | The research aimed to provide descriptive information about the day-to-day experiences of secondary-aged pupils who were | Semi-structured interviews | 19 |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| with Education, Health and Care Plans and Statements in mainstream secondary schools | | primary SEN of cognition and learning. 18% had a different identified primary area of SEN. | identified to have 'high level' SEND. | | |
| The perspectives and experiences of children with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools regarding their individual teaching assistant support | Pinkard (2021) United Kingdom | 10 children aged 10 – 11 years of age. All children had an EHCP and a range of needs: $n$ = 3 Autistic $n$ = 2 physical disabilities $n$ = 1 SEMH needs $n$ = 2 hearing loss $n$ = 1 Speech and language needs $n$ = 1 Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder | Explore the perspectives and experiences of children with SEN in mainstream primary schools regarding their individual TA support. | Semi-structured interviews | 18 |
| Stories of surveillance and resistance: Young people with dwarfism and Teaching | Ktenidis, (2023) United Kingdom | 14 participants between 12-30 years of age all who had Dwarfism. | To explore the experiences of children and young people who were supported by a TA at secondary school and 'illustrate how support both re-inscribes | In-person and online focus groups, one-to-one and paired interviews, email | 19 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Assistants in secondary schools in the United Kingdom | | 9 participants had general classroom TLSA support and 5 had one-to-one support. | cultural beliefs about disability as a problem to be managed and/or fixed and institutional power over disabled people.' | interviews and digital storytelling data collection approaches were utilised. | |
| Teaching assistant support for learning and wellbeing: the perspectives of secondary school pupils with special educational needs and disabilities | Porrino et al., (2024)<br><br>United Kingdom | 12 young people between the ages of 14-16 years. The gender of the participants was not disclosed<br><br>Young people had to be in receipt of one-to-one TA support for learning and well-being needs. Notably, the young people did not have to have an EHCP. | To explore how secondary school-aged pupils with SEND view the support they receive from TAs for their learning and well-being. | Semi-structured interviews | 19 |

*Note.* the original words used in the papers (i.e. Teaching Assistants, SEN Statements, pupil) have been retained to illustrate the variance of terminology used across the papers.

**2.5.1 Synthesis and analytical theme overview**

Four analytical themes were developed from the 11 descriptive themes (Figure 2). These themes were all formed with the following question in mind: *What are the lived experiences of children and young people engaging with TLSAs in primary and secondary school settings concerning their learning, social relationships, classroom engagement, autonomy and overall school experience?.* The table in Appendix I illustrates how the papers contributed to the individual themes.

**Figure 2**

*Representation of How the Descriptive Themes Form the Analytical Themes*
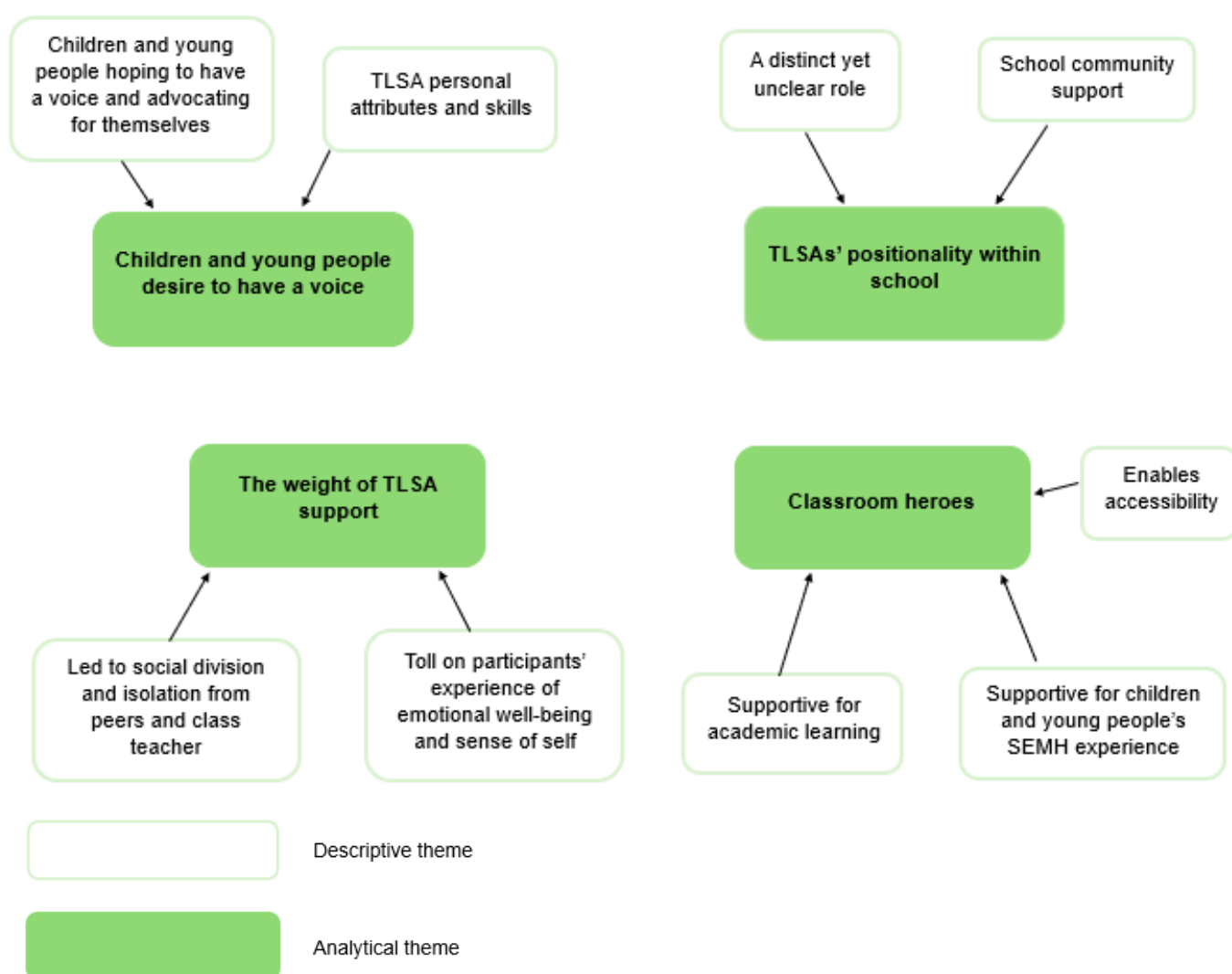
The four analytical themes developed by the researcher are interpretations of the data presented within the 19 included papers. Notably, the quotes taken from the papers were either participants' direct recollection of their experience with TLSA support or were experience-informed hopes that they had for future support as they shared what they hypothesised would have been helpful and preferable for them. It is acknowledged that three of the included papers involved gathering data from adults about their retrospective experiences of engaging with TLSAs in statutory education. For consistency, throughout the results, individuals who shared their views in the various pieces of research will be referred to as participants.

### 2.5.1.1 Children and Young People desire to have a voice
**'I would like to decide who supports me…and in which parts of my schedule…'**
**(Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009)**

This analytical theme is comprised of two descriptive themes: 'TLSA personal attributes and skills'' and 'Children and Young People hoping to have a voice and advocating for themselves'. This theme captures the overall notion that participants expressed a desire to have their voices heard regarding the support they wished to engage with and receive, as well as their need to advocate for their preferences and needs.

**TLSA personal attributes and skills**

Across 13 of the included papers, participants expressed a strong desire to have a degree of influence over the support they engaged with and received. Participants shared the skills and qualities that they felt TLSAs needed to possess in order to be successful in their role such as: *'[a] good teaching assistant needs to be friendly, kind'* and *'[…]they have to be thoughtful and caring towards the pupil'* (Bland & Sleightholme, 2012).

It also seemed key that TLSAs were attuned to being able to recognise when support or independence was needed without impacting the participants' independence: *'sometimes I can do it on my own and she lets me get on'* (Pinkard, 2021) and *'just enough help … not be*

*in your face or hang around you all the time … not get in the way of your mates … [and] sit in the class, but not right next to* you' (Rutherford, 2012).

> *[…]she'd be quite good at kind of keeping her distance, so she just kind of stand almost in the background and just kind of make sure like, if I kind of say to her: 'Oh, can you come here for a minute?' And then she'd come and say like: 'What was it that you need' or whatever…she was quite good at that really.* Ktenidis (2023).

> *If I have an assistant in maths, they will come to me in the first three questions and see I've done it like the first 30 seconds, so they just leave me to it and by the end of it I've got onto the extension work and maybe finished that* (Webster & Blatchford, 2018).

Such accounts suggest that participants valued, or hoped for, TLSAs who were attuned to their needs and able to mindfully gauge the level of support required while also providing appropriate distance to preserve participants' sense of autonomy and independence.

Participants also commented on the behaviour management skills that TLSAs may need: *[s]he needs to be a person who just doesn't get too angry too easily and somebody who doesn't let some 'slack about', '[s]ometimes to be strict but not too strict'* and *'assertive but not too assertive* (Bland & Sleightholme, 2012). Such accounts suggest that children and young people could see a value in reasonable boundaries being in place and seemingly felt comfortable with this.

Finally, some participants commented on how the TLSA was perceived by the participants and their peers: *'[s]he is always very friendly. Everybody likes working with her'* (Wren, 2017); such a quote suggests that certain attributes, such as being friendly, could be connected to the participants' (and their peers) motivation to engage.

All of these excerpts demonstrate that the participants perceived a range of personal attributes and skills to be key for TLSAs. These attributes and skills seemingly supported the

participants to have positive experiences and could be deemed essential given that children and young people are the main stakeholders of TLSA support.

**Children and young people hoping to have a voice and advocating for themselves**

Participants emphasised that being able to identify with the TLSA was important for them as this, seemingly, offered them a sense of psychological safety that allowed them to be able to advocate for their preference and needs. This was particularly key for participants who had physical disabilities, which meant that they needed support with personal care:

> *'It is more difficult to say how I want help in the toilet than how I want to put on my jacket'* and *'It's no fun getting help from a girl, it would have been better if it had been a guy. But it's lucky that my female assistants have been slightly older—you have no choice when you need help, you have to take what you are given'* (Skär & Tamm, 2010).

For those who shared their views in relation to personal care it could be inferred that they experienced a sense of helplessness, *'you have no choice'* (Skär & Tamm, 2010), highlighting the notion that children and young people can feel as though they are *'done to'* rather than involved in a *'done with'* manner when supported by TLSAs.

In relation to support in the classroom, some individuals shared their views that suggested frustration as they seemed to know what they needed in order to be more independent but were not given these opportunities: *'If I were allowed to use the computer more I wouldn't need so much help at school. It's not much fun having all these old ladies hanging around me all the time'* (Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009). This suggests that the TLSA support resulted in the participant experiencing impacted autonomy despite them having an awareness of what would have supported them to gain and maintain independence.

Notably, over time, some participants seemed able to find their voice which enabled them to share their views with the TLSA. For example, within Ktenidis' (2023) paper, it was reported that a participant shared that initially they would accept all support that was offered by the TLSA, however, over time they became more able to express their genuine wishes

and say, *'please leave me alone'*. Similar views seemed to be shared in Skär and Tamm's (2010) paper: *'She is with me in the classroom but during the breaks I want to be in peace so she goes to the staff room'.* In comparison, it seemed that other participants found such self-advocacy more challenging and they were left with silent desire to have more independence over their learning: *'I don't like support always. Sometimes I want to work alone.'* (Mortier et al., 2010).

Some participants felt that the support they received was from TLSAs who they did not feel they could connect well with: *'generally older, near retiring age. There's always like this patronising nature…'* (Ktenidis, 2023) and another shared their preferences '*a younger person would be better. Maybe just close the generation gap [by] one'* (Whitburn, 2013). Relatedness seemed pivotal in the connection that participants desired to have with those supporting them *'It is more fun if you are more similar and can have the same interests.'* (Skär & Tamm, 2010).

These aforementioned quotes prompt thoughts vis-à-vis how the participants' experiences with TLSAs may have impacted their sense of self as a learner as well as their independence as some participants reported having adults in close proximity to them for a high proportion of the school day.

## 2.5.1.2 TLSAs' positionality within school
**'Most teachers are very strict, but I wouldn't want my class's teaching assistant to be really silly or really strict. Somewhere in the middle would be good, for me that is'**
**(Bland & Sleightholme, 2012)**

Data from eight of the included research papers informed this analytical theme. Participants described how they perceived TLSAs to be similar and different to class teachers and reflected on the wider support they perceived TLSAs offered to their school community. Participants noticed differences between the adults in the classroom, such as the role of the TLSA not being the same as that of the role of a teacher. Participants made such distinctions based on overt, visible factors (e.g., where the TLSA positioned themselves

within the classroom) and covert differences (e.g., earnings of a TLSA in comparison to teachers which are unlikely to have been visible or known to the children). Participants would also distinguish adults in the classroom based on how they interacted with them. This analytical theme is divided into two descriptive themes: A distinct yet unclear role and School community support.

**A distinct yet unclear role**

It seemed that some participants perceived clear differences between the adults in the classroom while others found it more challenging to distinguish their roles. It is possible that different factors impacted participants' abilities to discern the differences. For example, participant's own experiences, such as having family members working in the education sector, may have influenced the amount of knowledge they had about covert differences between the roles in schools: *'They don't get paid as much'* (Fraser & Meadows, 2008).

> *I don't think they dedicate as much time as teachers normally do, whereas a teacher goes home and marks books every night and plans what she's going to do for the rest of the week, the TA well, they just come in and help on that day.* (Fraser & Meadows, 2008).

Participants' ages were also recorded to impact how they perceived the TLSA role. This was a factor noted particularly in Bowers et al.'s (1997) research. For example, one participant's quote *'[t]o help the people who find it hard to understand'* was thought to reflect that children in Year 4 and above became better able to articulate that TLSAs were there to support 'needs'. In addition, within Eyres and colleagues' (2010) research, it was noted that a Year 6 participant shared: *'Miss McAngel is the actual teacher teacher teacher'.* This particular quote demonstrated the linguistic phenomenon of methodical repetition whereby the same word is repeated to intensify the meaning of the word (Rosenthal & Telenkova, 1989, as cited in Khashimova, 2022) which could be interpreted as suggesting that the child has an understanding of the differences between the teacher and TLSA role.

In contrast to covert differences, some participants shared overt differences that they

noticed such as: *'[t]he teacher actually sits on the chair and the helper doesn't, so that's why the helper isn't the teacher'* and *'[s]he's not a teacher because she doesn't stay in the classroom all the time'* (Fraser & Meadows, 2008). *'To be a proper teacher you need more time, you can't go home for dinner because you have to mark and prepare lessons. TAs go home on their bike . . . but they do do playground duty'* (Williams & O'Connor, 2012).

Furthermore, some participants shared that the way the teacher interacted with the TLSA informed their perceptions of the role differences. For example, one participant recalled the teacher making requests: *'[o]h, could you do this for us Barbara, could you do that? Or could you help these children please' and like, she would do that, you know',* and *'[s]he does some things that Miss Burgess wants her to do.'* (Eyres et al., 2010).

Participants also appeared to perceive that adults within the two roles of teacher and TLSA did different things: *'Barbara isn't a proper teacher: she helps us, she doesn't actually teach us.'* (Eyres et al., 2010), *'[s]he doesn't teach the class, the class isn't hers.'* (Fraser & Meadows, 2008). In addition, the children seemingly conducted themselves differently depending on the role that the adult engaging with them held: *'[W]hen Mrs Y is in they are alright – sometimes they are off and on and when the teaching assistant comes in they are naughty all the time'* (Williams & O'Connor, 2012). Another participant spoke of the different dynamic that arose when the TLSA took the class *'[i]t doesn't feel like a 'class', it's a different kind of atmosphere, you act differently without meaning to'* (Williams & O'Connor, 2012) and *'[w]hen we are with the teachers they just say 'try' and we know that we have to try but the teaching assistant takes it more softly.'* (Williams & O'Connor, 2012).

The quotes reflecting on the differences in the ways that participants and their peers engaged when in the presence of TLSAs compared to teachers suggests a perceived difference in the authority of these classroom roles.

## School community support

TLSAs were perceived to be supportive for the wider school community by the participants, suggesting an integral role in bridging the home-school communities *'I think parents as well because they can come in and they can speak to the parents'*, as well as

helping within the school *'[t]hey are very important because they help everybody in the whole school not just like the teacher does, say 30 children, they help everybody'* (Fraser & Meadows, 2008).

Finally, TLSAs were seen as supporting the teacher with various aspects of the teaching role: *'[t]here are more than one teacher per class because different pupils do different levels and one teacher couldn't manage'* (Bowers, 1997). *'[T]he teaching assistants do some of the teachers' jobs – if there were no teaching assistants the teachers would get really stressed out'* and *'Mrs X told us that without Mrs Y and Miss Z she would go crazy'* (Williams & O'Connor, 2012).

Such accounts suggest that the participants could sometimes discern the differences between teachers and TLSAs. These differences often involved observing a difference in the power that the respective adults hold within the classroom. Whilst it seemed that teachers were perceived to have more authority than TLSAs within the classroom, TLSAs were reported to often be perceived as the primary point of contact for participants' families. In addition, TLSAs were noted to be crucial support for the class teacher and this highlights a juxtaposition between the perceived authority of teachers and the relational accessibility of TLSAs, demonstrating the complementary yet contrasting roles that these two positions seemingly hold within school communities.

### 2.5.1.3 Classroom heroes
### 'To help you and incurrige (encourage) you' (Bowers, 1997)

Seventeen of the papers comprise this analytical theme and participants' views about the positive experiences they had as a result of TLSA support are explored. Some of the quotes seemed to liken TLSAs to that of heroes as the support offered was recalled to have enabled the participants to access school. As some participants reported that TLSAs were a protective factor in supporting them to be able to attend school, the researcher inferred that these TLSAs were somewhat reminiscent of heroes. Research has identified that absence from education is correlated with poorer educational outcomes and lower future financial

61

earnings (Department for Education, 2025). Therefore, given that some participants reported that TLSAs enabled and supported them to attend education, which has been correlated with different positive outcomes, the primary researcher of this current SLR, felt that conceptualising TLSAs as heroes within the context of this theme would be appropriate. To highlight the integral role that TLSAs have, the participants' recollections have been presented within three descriptive themes: Supportive for children and young people's SEMH experience, Supportive for academic learning and Enables accessibility. However, it is somewhat challenging to disentangle these as they influence one another. Therefore, connections between the descriptive themes are made throughout this section.

**Supportive for children and young people's SEMH experience**

TLSAs were perceived as helpful in managing adverse experiences like bullying *'I usually tell and then she [the paraprofessional] goes and talks to the person [the bully]'* and *'When I was around her [the paraprofessional] I didn't care.... She was like my protector.* (Broer et al., 2005). Similarly, students expressed a broader sense of emotional security, noting *'[t]hey are there for you. They back you up. You feel like if you've got a problem they will help you get through it …'* (Groom & Rose, 2005). There was also evidence that students found it challenging when their trusted TLSA left and they shared the impact that this had on them:

> *. . . cuz year 9 I struggled really bad but when it came to year 10 I felt like everything was easier, much easier and she made, I felt like her [support] was going amazing. And then since she left, everything has been going more downhill* (Porrino et al., 2024).

TLSAs were also noted to be someone whom the participants felt that they could trust: *'[…] if you trust them you can like talk to 'em about anything really like'* (Porrino et al., 2024); *'If you don't feel comfortable talking to your teacher for any reason you can talk to her…'* (Fraser & Meadows, 2008). Furthermore, it was identified that TLSAs offered a positive connection for the participants. In some cases, this connection was deemed to be better than that of the class teacher: *'they (TA) know me much better . . . the teacher has to know*

*everyone . . . but the TA, I'm the first person, so they know the most about me* (Pinkard, 2021*), '[t]he classroom teacher, she didn't know me very well'* (Broer at al., 2005). TLSAs also seemed to support participants to feel a sense of belonging and positive emotion towards school. One participant shared that the TLSA contributed to them feeling *'like I'm meant to be here'*; the same participant also shared *'school would be 'not fun . . . and less laughtery',* (without the TLSA) (Pinkard, 2021).

Finally, there were reflections about how TLSAs supported the participants' confidence and emotional regulation: *'…help me build up the confidence to talk and I'll say and ask an adult when I need help'* and *'I get out of control; but when I had someone around me, it made me stop'* (Broer et al., 2005).

These quotes highlight the protective function and integral role to supporting belonging and SEMH experiences that TLSAs can serve in navigating the often-challenging social environments of schools.

**Supportive for academic learning**

In addition to supporting participants' SEMH, TLSAs were described as playing an important role in academic support.  Disentangling SEMH and feelings towards academic learning is difficult as they are, arguably, bi-directional *(how individuals feel about learning is likely to impact the outcomes they experience, and the process and outcomes of learning are similarly likely to impact how individuals feel).* However, to highlight the breadth of support that TLSAs offered, the author of this current research inferred that some comments held some primary distinction to SEMH support or academic learning.

Reflections on how TLSAs supported the participants with academic elements of schooling were noted: *'Marie comes to help me in class…[s]he gives me some extra explanation if I need it'* (Mortier et al*.,* 2010) and *'[i]t [TA support] helps me build up confidence to say when I need help' (Porrino et al., 2024). 'They helped me to read and I don't like reading'* (Broer et al., 2005) and *'because then well you get to know spellings 'stead a getting them wrong all the time'* (Logan, 2006). There was also a specific example given

about how a TLSA used scaffolding approaches to further children and young people's knowledge and skills: *'she broke down the steps and showed me how to do it on the whiteboard. Then I could do it by myself', 'sometimes she tells me to carry on, try to extend my sentences'* (Pinkard, 2021).

These aforementioned quotes highlight the role that TLSAs have in supporting children and young people with their academic learning and the recollections suggest that such support also had a positive impact on the participants' overall affective feelings towards schooling.

**Enables accessibility**

Finally, it seemed that TLSAs enabled the participants to be assisted more quickly than would have likely been possible if only the class teacher was present; *'It's good having teaching assistants because if there's only one teacher going around you have to put your hand up for ages and wait and by the time they get to you it's the end of the lesson'* (Williams & O'Connor, 2012) and *'[s]ometime she writes stuff down for me because I'm as slow as a tortoise and my friends are as fast as rabbits'* (Tews & Lupart, 2008); suggesting that access to TLSAs enabled the participants to be more productive within the classroom environment as they were able to more quickly access support that they perceived that they needed.

Participants were also able to reflect on how the TLSA enabled their participation in mainstream education and supported a richer social experience. These quotes suggest that the participants recounted experiences that were made better because of the presence of TLSAs: *'[w]ithout them I could never have been in a regular class...I would have been in a place away from my friends...I would not have the friends I have'* and *'[My educational assistant] helped me a lot adjusting to a new school and teaching my classmates about me and about autism'* (Tews & Lupart, 2008).

*'[w]ell I was taken out of the classroom to do my SATs as I needed somebody to write it for me and I thought it was a privilege for me and like a helpful thing and good'* (Fraser & Meadows, 2008). This former quote illustrates how the presence of an adult enabled the

participant to access an environment which was perceived to be better than the standard provision (possibly a school hall) and seemed to have had positive results for them both academically and for their emotional experience.

Furthermore, TLSAs were reported to support the participants with their emotion regulation and social skill development and this specifically supported their accessibility: '*she gets you out of trouble … cos she keeps reminding me about the yellow lines…she says not to play … bulldog … she is helping me*' (Fraser & Meadows, 2008).'*[S]ometimes I want to play different than the rules so I needed help to not do that*' (Tews & Lupart, 2008). The participants seemed pleased to have had access to this additional support and it could be hypothesised that this supported the participants to be able to access the activities that their peers were engaging with and, in turn, increase their experiences of inclusion and belonging.

### 2.5.1.4 The weight of TLSA support

### 'I am doing, please just leave me alone, I am fine' Ktenidis (2023)

In contrast to the previous analytical theme of Classroom heroes, some participants reported that their experiences with TLSAs had a negative impact on their experiences at school. Therefore, the support for these participants was less desirable. 15 of the papers contributed to this analytical theme and it is divided into two descriptive themes: Led to social division and isolation from peers and the class teacher and Toll on participants' experience of emotional well-being and sense of self.

**Led to social division and isolation from peers and the class teacher**

Experiences of social division between the participant and their peers were apparent as a result of them being in receipt of TLSA support:

*Everyone's just sitting with their friends and mates and it's just me sat at the front, no one else to talk to. There's just like no interaction with the rest of the class, it's like I'm being a bit isolated, a bit like isolation* (Porrino et al., 2024).

*I was kind of getting embarrassed because I always had, like a mother right there.*

*People were like looking at me and stuff, and saying, "Why do you always have this person with you who is twice as old as you? (Broer et al., 2005).*

One participant made a clear connection between receiving support and experiences of bullying. *'People picked on me because I had an aide. The kids would pick on me because they didn't need anybody and I did'* (Broer et al., 2005).

Across a number of the papers included within this review, participants seemed to allude to the idea that children and young people who had TLSA support were different in some way *'[b]ecause some people are slow learners and they have a special teacher', '[i]f some children are a bit behind then the teacher helps them'* and *'for children that aren't as quit[e] clever'* (Bowers, 1997).

Participants also spoke of the poorer relationship they felt that they had with the class teacher which was perceived to be a consequence of TLSA support. It must be acknowledged that the TLSA was likely to have been deployed under the guidance of the class teacher and, therefore, the responsibility of the poorer relationship experienced between participants and the class teacher may have been understandably, but somewhat unfairly, attributed to the TLSAs: *'Sometimes I'm relieved, like when Miss X goes somewhere else, cuz I get to spend a bit more time with other teachers'* (Pinkard, 2021). Such a comment suggests that participants felt that their access to the class teacher was compromised due to them receiving TLSA support. Furthermore, other comments highlighted that the participants possibly felt that individuals who received TLSA support were less worthy of the teacher's direct support *'[t]hey [teachers] can't really spend a lot of time with one person [the student with a disability] because they have a class to teach'* (Broer et al., 2005) as it was perceived that such support would take too much time. This raises concerns about how TLSA support may impact children and young people's sense of importance and value within the class.

**Toll on participants' sense of self and emotional well-being**

Some participants reflected on how TLSA support led to them feeling undesirable emotional experiences: *'It [having a paraprofessional assigned to me] embarrasses me', 'I*

*don't want all those [paraprofessionals] with me all, every day'* (Broer et al., 2005), *'[…] was kind of overprotective as well so if I wanted to do something a little bit different … and a bit more extreme, she would always be on my case. It's like mmm, I'm not used to this, I need space'* (Rutherford, 2012).

> *Oh, what are you doing? Oh, ok. Oh, are you alright with that question? Are you alright with this? Are you alright with that?' I am like: 'Fine'. 'Oh, come on, just get on', like 'Let's get on with your work then* (Ktenidis, 2023).

These quotes allude to participants understandably feeling as though they were being watched more than their peers who did not have such additional support. This increased attention also seemed to lead to negative impacts on their emotional well-being. Feelings of frustration seemed to arise from the TLSA support: '[t]*hey would tell me words when I'm trying to sound them out, and that bothered me', 'They just give you the same stuff all the time; it repeats'* (Broer et al., 2005).'*He doesn't listen to me, but always does things his way, and I don't think that's good'* (Skär and Tamm, 2010) and *'It's like: 'I am doing, please just leave me alone, I am fine.'* (Ktenidis, 2022). One participant noted how it led to them feeling like they were not actively engaging in the learning: *'[i]t feels like cheating … if they are writing down everything for me'* (Webster & Blatchford, 2018), suggesting that the support resulted in the participant experiencing tensions between their lived experiences and sense of morality. In addition, participants described how their senses of autonomy and independence were constrained, *'she just follows me and … she says that she's a shadow … that she's my shadow'* (Logan, 2006). *'I didn't even have to do anything. She pretty much did it all for me.'* (Broer et al.,2005). '[C]*ause I'm not writing, and . . . [the teacher aide is] writing everything out for me, and I'm just answering the questions'* (Whitburn, 2013), and '*I don't like support always. Sometimes I want to work alone* (Mortier et al., 2010).

> *Um, well like when I used to have this old teaching assistant, she used to rush me a lot. And I, I don't do very good when I'm under pressure and I panic. Um, because I have like, I write really slow. That's why sometimes they [TA] write for me . . .* (Porrino et al.,

2024).

This range of accounts brings attention to the negative experiences that some participants had as a result of the TLSA support. These highlight the potentially detrimental effects individuals can experience in relation to their SEMH and overall school experience when the TLSA support offered is not carefully informed and tailored.

## 2.6 Discussion

This systematic literature review utilised qualitative research methods to answer the question of: *'What are the lived experiences of children and young people engaging with TLSAs in primary and secondary school settings concerning their learning, social relationships, classroom engagement, autonomy and overall school experience?.* Through the process of thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), studies exploring children's, young people's and adults' (retrospective) views on their experiences of being supported by a TLSA within statutory educational settings were brought together. Through this approach, four analytical themes were developed to provide a more comprehensive, structured account of their concerns, values and expectations concerning TLSAs: *children and young people desire to have a voice, TLSAs' positionality within school, the weight of TLSA support* and *classroom heroes.* It is hoped that the findings of this review can meaningfully inform better practice relating to the deployment of TLSAs within schools (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Nineteen papers were included gathering the views from a total of 1,467 participants between the ages of 3 and 30 years. Given the diverse range of needs that were identified across the included papers, it is important to recognise that participants were likely to require different forms of support (e.g., some may have needed physical support whereas other may have required support with emotion regulation); therefore, their support preferences may be specific to their individual profile. Across the included studies, it was not always certain if the TLSA support being reflected on involved TLSAs who were offering one-to-one support or if the TLSA was there to support the entirety of the class. If the TLSA offered general classroom support, this may explain why some participants felt that the TLSAs were not

attuned to their preferences as it could be that the TLSA did not know the participants particularly well. Alternatively, if TLSA support was provided on a one-to-one basis, it might explain why participants felt that the support was too much and negatively impacted their experiences. Moreover, the time in the academic year when the research was conducted might have influenced the findings: if participants were interviewed early in the academic year, there might have been little time for the TLSA to develop their understanding of the participant's support preferences.

Whilst, individually, the findings from each study may not be generalisable to a wider range of children and young people due to the specific needs of participants within a given study, this SLR aimed to integrate the findings from across these papers. The value of this synthesis was to highlight shared experiences of being supported by TLSAs and, in doing so, provide better insights into the broader implications of how such support is implemented and received.

### *Importance of involving children*

Across the reviewed papers, it was clear that participants had a desire to have a voice and be meaningfully involved in the support they received; this included both *how* and *who* they were supported by. This is key for educators to recognise as this finding highlights a disconnect between the primary stakeholders of TLSA support (i.e., children and young people) and their opportunity to regularly voice their preferences about the support they receive. Currently, despite child-centred practice being underscored as integral within the Children and Families Act (2014) and Article 12 of The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), children and young people have shared feeling dissatisfied with the opportunities available to be actively involved in decision making processes within education (Horgan et al., 2015). Whilst some individuals did have opportunities to share their views through platforms such as student councils, this was not the case for all young people (Horgan et al., 2015). Anecdotally, it is also known that some schools invite students to be part of interview panels for staff recruitment and these types of opportunities can afford children and young people chances to have agency and voice

Teaching and Learning Support in Statutory Education

(Geraghty & Lyons, 2022). For example, involving children and young people in interview panels to recruit staff in health-care settings was shown to be a positive and useful experience for children, job candidates and the professional panel members (Allan & Travers-Hill, 2019). Importantly, such opportunities give children chances to develop positive relationships with the adults involved in the interview panel and these experiences can help children to develop important professional skills for their own future (Geraghty and Lyons, 2022). The multitude of benefits highlighted within this small pool of research including children and young people feeling a sense of agency, developing positive relationships with adults, and gaining skills likely to support their own future interview experiences, draws attention the breadth of benefits that can arise when children and young people are involved in decision-making processes on matters that affect them. Taken together, the aforementioned research, and the findings from this SLR, underscore the importance of children and young people being involved in discussions about their experiences of the support they receive in educational settings.

### Links to psychological theory

Psychological theory stresses the importance of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), perceived control over matters which affect the self (Thompson, 2005) and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985) for a person's well-being, motivation and healthy functioning. A key finding from this SLR relates to children and young people's wish for a greater sense of autonomy over the support that they engage with. Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory (SDT) suggests that an individual's motivation is influenced by the following three concepts: a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Support offered by TLSAs is likely to impact all three of these components. The way in which support is given is likely to influence how autonomous and competent a child feels in school and how well the child and TLSA connect will impact the sense of relatedness that is experienced. Indeed, this SLR highlighted that sometimes participants perceived TLSA support to be a process of being *'done to'* rather than *'done with'*. Such perceptions likely shape the sense of autonomy a child or young person experiences and, thus, could lead to decreased motivation and less

self-actualisation. Through the lens of SDT, children need to be involved in shaping the support they receive to increase their sense of autonomy over their learning and, consequently, foster their motivation for, and independence in, learning. Given that motivation has been identified as a key predictor for academic success (Steinmayr et al., 2019), nurturing it is paramount. In practice, this may involve children being empowered to develop strategies which facilitate their autonomy as well as to self-advocate for when they need support.

Similarly, for a positive overall school experience, it will be important for children and young people to have some choice about whether and how they work with a TLSA, consistent with theories of personal control (Thompson, 2005). All of these considerations and adaptations to practice are likely to increase the possibility of individuals having a positive school experience. This is important as research has identified that positive relationships with school staff, such as teachers, has been linked to young people showing more positive behavioural communication in their teenage years (Obsuth et al., 2023) as well as having positive influences on their long-term mental health (Dittmann & Forstmeier, 2022).

In addition, recent research highlighted the importance of supporting TLSAs to develop their knowledge of psychological theory relevant for learning. Through this research, training coined as the Mediated Learning Support Approach 'MeLSA' (Stanley-Duke and colleagues, 2022) has been formed. MeLSA draws on key theories such as Vygtosky's zone of proximal development (1978), Feuerstein et al.'s (1979) explanation of 'mediating' and Sweller's (1988) theory of cognitive load. MeLSA is designed to develop TLSAs' psychological knowledge and understanding of how children and young people learn best and, by doing so, enable TLSAs to better support children and young people to become independent and competent learners. Whilst the research that has been conducted into MeLSA is currently limited, it has been identified that TLSAs who attended the training reported more psychologically informed thinking following engagement with the training (Wright et al., 2023). Given the findings of this SLR, whereby it was identified that participants reported varied experiences of being supported in their learning through approaches such as

scaffolding, this current research strengthens the rationale and highlights the potential value for implementing programmes such as MeLSA.

### *The integral importance of attunement, autonomy and independence*

The TLSAs' apparent attunement to the children and young people seemed important for the participants' experiences of TLSA support. When TLSAs seemed to acknowledge and tailor their support to meet the child's strengths, needs and preferences, more positive experiences were shared (e.g., Porrino et al., 2024; Webster & Blatchford, 2018). Other participants reported that TLSA support had negative consequences for their academic and social experiences (e.g., Broer et al., 2005; Ktenidis, 2022). Considering the importance of children and young people feeling autonomous, empowered and enabled to advocate for themselves (when they desire greater independence and when they would like additional support), it is essential that TLSAs can build rapport with the children and young people they support in order to be better attuned to their needs and possess better understanding of their support preferences. Notably, attunement needs to be developed reciprocally between TLSAs and children. To achieve this, TLSAs will need to explore children's views about how they would like to be supported, and children will benefit from learning about ways in which the TLSA may be able to offer support so that they can co-construct the approaches that may be utilised.

This SLR has brought attention to participants' views about not always wanting to have a TLSA constantly close to them, as it reportedly hindered their independence, academic and social experiences. This adds additional evidence and reaffirms the importance of shifts in TLSA practice, moving away from a *velcro* to a *helicopter*-approach (CFE Research, 2024) to reduce the likelihood of these negative experiences being encountered.

In addition, some participants had a desire to be supported and work alongside a TLSA whom they could relate to (such characteristics which were referred to include their age, gender and interests). It must be acknowledged that it may not always be possible to match TLSAs to children's specific preferences and, importantly, the value of a TLSA is not determined by such personal characteristics. However, it could be argued, from the position

of SDT, that if children and young people are able to relate to the TLSA who supports them, this may have a positive impact on their motivation for learning. Trust and relatedness are critically connected, with research demonstrating that if an individual can trust others (such as TLSAs), this can positively impact academic outcomes and behaviour (Romero, 2015). A recent systematic literature review (Niedlich et al., 2021) highlighted that a key component for positive educational outcomes was trust, underscoring the importance of TLSAs being afforded opportunities to develop positive connections with the children and young people they support. Furthermore, Pianta's (1999) work demonstrated the importance of teacher-pupil relationship quality in promoting better developmental outcomes for children highlighting that relationship quality between educational staff (including TLSAs) and pupils is central. Noddings (1992), too, reported that positive experiences with teaching staff enhanced learning outcomes and well-being for children.

While it was identified that participants expressed a desire to have some say over who supports them, it is necessary to recognise that differences across included papers in children and young people's perceived ability to advocate for their needs and preferences could be attributed to differences in participants' self-awareness of themselves as a learner as well as their confidence to ask an adult to adapt their practice.  In order to articulate their desires, children and young people need to have the verbal language or communication system as well as confidence and awareness that the support being offered to them is not optimal for their individual preferences. Such sophisticated skills will take time for children and young people to develop. Furthermore, challenges in how adults may perceive children and young people asking them to adapt their practice are likely to further complicate the likelihood of individuals feeling able to ask for support to be tailored. Taken together, this highlights a need for education settings to support children and young people to develop an understanding of what supports and hinders their experiences in education as empowering children and young people with such knowledge is likely to be of benefit to them with their classroom engagement and, additionally, helpful as they progress into different learning environments as adults. Moreover, school settings will need to become more au fait with

facilitating and engaging in conversations with children and young people that may challenge their practice (e.g., children may share preferences for support which differ from the adult's typical approach).

***The perceived role of a TLSA***

Across a number of the included papers, participants articulated that they perceived TLSAs to hold a different role to that of teachers. Based on the available accounts, it seemed that the participants perceived TLSAs to hold different expectations about behaviour and academic output. Earlier research identified that TLSAs have been observed to prioritise outcomes rather than process (Bosanquet & Radford, 2019) and it could be hypothesised that the differences in approaches and expectation that TLSAs seemingly hold could account for the variations in the ways that children perceive and engage with TLSAs. It could be that such differences in approaches to tasks impact the way in which children and young people then subsequently engage with TLSAs.

Differences in children and young people's responses to and perceptions of TLSAs may reflect differences in how teachers engaged with TLSAs in the school settings. Within this SLR, it was noted that some teachers were observed, by the children and young people, to regularly make continual requests to TLSAs (Eyres et al., 2010). From a social learning perspective (Bandura, 1977), children and young people's engagement with and perceptions of TLSAs may be shaped by the ways they observe teachers interact with them. Accordingly, if children observe teachers talking to TLSAs in a less respectful way, the children's views of the TLSA might be impacted. Therefore, it is vital that teachers ensure that they engage with TLSAs in a way that does not assert hierarchical positions but, instead, brings children's attention to the professional partnership between teachers and TLSAs. This could support children to hold perceptions towards TLSAs that are similar to those held towards teachers and help to mitigate the differences in authority that some participants reported to perceive.

Some participants noticed that TLSAs were able to support a wide range of people. This catchment included children, young people, their families and teachers. These findings are reflective of the research conducted by Hall and Webster (2023) which identified the wide

role that TLSAs held during the COVID-19 pandemic. It could be said that this wide role was somewhat true before the pandemic too, considering the findings and date range of the papers utilised within this SLR. In addition, research by Moss and colleagues (2021) and Unison (2022) has noted that TLSAs informally have a significant pastoral role which is argued to relate to budget cuts that led to a reduction of support staff working specifically in pastoral and welfare roles. The significant role TLSAs hold has also been noted by other research which acknowledges the vital contribution TLSAs make to the school community (Watson et al., 2013).

**2.6.1 Strengths and limitations**

This SLR contributes to the literature base by synthesising what participants, with a range of identified SEN, have reported about their experiences with TLSAs. In addition, the views of participants who were not identified to have a specific SEN have also been captured within the scope of this review. Having gathered a range of views, the findings and implications are likely to apply to many children and young people within schools today. Given that TLSAs support many children, bringing attention to what the main stakeholders of such support find helpful or, conversely, more challenging, can inform educational staff's future approach and, thus, increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for children and young people's educational experiences.

A number of limitations of this SLR must be considered: some of these are concerned with the way in which the review was conducted and others relate to limitations with the research included. First, whilst 19 papers were utilised within this review, all were from Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) nations (Henrich et al., 2010) which means that the generalisability is limited to nations and cultures which are similar. This is a significant limitation given that TLSAs are present across non-Western nations (UNESCO, 2020). As a result of the dearth of available literature, individuals' experiences of being supported by TLSAs outside of WEIRD nations remain unknown. In acknowledgement of the constraints of the available research, further efforts should be taken

to further broaden and build the research base that gathers children and young people's views about their experiences of TLSA support across various educational settings and phases globally. This will help to strengthen the evidence base which, in turn will support to develop practitioners' knowledge about children and young people's views of TLSA support.

Another consideration is that some of the papers involved older participants reflecting retrospectively on their experiences of TLSA support. Given the ever-changing educational landscape, it may be that the support these participants were reflecting on would no longer be offered in the same way within the current context of 2025. However, despite the changes in TLSA deployment, it is important to acknowledge that participants who were involved in the respective pieces of research shared their lived experiences and, therefore, whilst TLSA deployment may be different now, it is key to acknowledge the difficulties that participants reported experiencing as to reduce the likelihood of such approaches being re-introduced in the future (i.e., TLSAs being constantly present with a child) as this could be detrimental to a child's school experience. Nowadays, advancements have led to TLSAs being less commonly deployed as continuous support for children in schools. A particular influence which is likely to have altered TLSA deployment was suggestions from Webster and Blatchford (2013) in specific relation to Education, Health and Care Plans. This recommendation involved encouraging professionals who were contributing towards statutory assessments to specify the pedagogical approaches to be utilised, such as appropriate scaffolding (Wood et al., 1976), rather than specifying a number of hours in which TLSAs should be supporting children and young people. To further advance this recommendation whilst considering the findings from this SLR, professionals involved in such processes should endeavour to take time to meaningfully ask children and young people for their views about what approaches to support would be preferable and increase awareness of the importance of such practice with others that they work alongside (e.g., teachers and SLT) so that opportunities for children and young people to share their views become plentiful.

Generally, the body of research utilised within this SLR was deemed to be of good

quality. There were differences in the amount of transparency reported in relation to the methodological approaches and participant demographics shared which meant that the data that was available to be extracted was variable and comparisons made across the respective datasets were therefore limited. In addition, all of the research was viewed as equal, irrespective of the quality appraisal findings. Whilst the researcher of this paper was mindful to ensure that they only extracted data using the participants' quotes (to avoid being influenced by the other researcher's interpretations of the data collected), it must be acknowledged that the methodological rigour (e.g., the framing of the questions asked to the participants) will have impacted the responses that participants gave (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). This will have impacted the quotes that were included within these papers and, therefore, utilised within this SLR. However, the researcher felt that it was important to include all papers identified, regardless of the methodological rigour employed by the respective researchers, as the participants had time to share their views about their school-based experiences. In line with the researcher's epistemological position of interpretivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018), critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975; Zhang, 2023)) and values, it felt key to honour and respect all views shared.

Finally, this review adopted a systematic search approach which utilised specific key words and terms. The term 'student' was not included within the search terms for this SLR as initial scoping searches did not return any papers that were relevant for this current research paper (the papers identified when using the term related to TLSAs' experiences of supporting students rather than students' experiences of being supported). In addition, when including this particular term, the volume of papers returned was too extensive for the researcher to screen with the resources available (e.g., time and team capacity). Therefore, given that chosen search terms were used, there is potential that additional papers may exist but were not returned by the databases due to the search terms specified. Consequently, additional research which utilises a broader range of search terms could be beneficial.

**2.6.2 Conclusions**

Overall, this review identified that TLSAs do have a significant effect on children and young people's autonomy, learning, social relationships, school engagement and overall school experience. It is evident that this influence can be perceived and experienced positively but this is not always the case. The findings revealed some key ideas of what factors make a difference to positive outcomes in relation to the TLSA role. These factors include personal characteristics of the TLSA, their ability to attune and mediate the learning for each unique learner and their ability to offer the child a reasonable amount of space in which to learn and develop. Finally, TLSAs could also be skilled at supporting the learner's social experiences, supporting concepts such as their emotional regulation and social skills.

'*Children are experts in their own lives. To provide meaningful support, we must listen to their voices, understand their perspectives, and involve them in decisions that affect their well-*being' (Lundy, 2007). In line with this important premise, it is key that all education professionals aim to consider and uphold the importance of the voice of the children and young people when considering the support and practices within school settings. The key finding from this SLR was that children and young people, generally, seem to hold a desire to be heard and have active influence within the TLSA support that they receive and engage with, which aligns with the aforementioned statement. Moving forwards, it will be imperative for education staff to aim to ensure that child-centred practices are upheld (Lundy, 2007). Moreover, children and young people's voices need to be heard and, where possible, acted upon so that they experience genuine autonomy and influence over the support that they engage with. This is crucial as inevitably, TLSA support impacts children and young people the most. By adopting such practices it is hoped that children and young people will encounter positive experiences with TLSA support which, in turn, could support the likelihood of better outcomes.

Chapter 3 **"The glue that holds a school together" Investigating the well-being of UK Teaching and Learning Support Assistants (TLSAs) through a national scoping survey and pilot peer support groups**

## 3.1 Abstract

Education is a demanding sector with significant pressures placed on staff to support children to achieve academically and thrive both socially and emotionally. Teaching and Learning Support Assistants (TLSAs) play a crucial role in helping children achieve. However, despite their essential contributions, TLSAs enter the role with differing experiences and receive variable training and support. Additionally, the role of a TLSA has changed considerably over time, leading to a lack of clarity about their responsibilities. While research has examined the impact of the demanding education sector on the well-being of teachers, the well-being of TLSAs has been overlooked.

176 TLSAs responded to a UK-wide mixed-methods survey including the Workplace PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2014) and open-ended questions on their lived experiences as current employees in UK primary schools (Study 1). Additionally, peer support groups were piloted in two UK primary school settings to enhance TLSAs' well-being (Study 2). In Study 1, through the process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), five themes were formed to capture the nuance of participants' experiences: The Impact of Challenge, The Vital Role of TLSAs, Power of Connection, Low Sense of Worth Within the School Community and Fulfilment and Flourishing. The Workplace PERMA Profiler results indicated that TLSAs had 'normal functioning' well-being; this numerical classification is considered in conjunction with the qualitative findings. Within Study 2, the Workplace PERMA Profiler pre-programme results were comparable to those gained through the national survey. The participants' ($n$ = 5) scores increased following completion of the sessions which suggests positive effects of engaging with the peer support programme. Whilst these quantitative results were not tested for statistical significance due to the small participant numbers, the assertion that the peer

support groups were helpful was supported through deductive manifest content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016. This identified that participants reported engaging with the programme had been positive and such benefits were reflective of the hopes that participants from the national survey had shared.

The limitations of this research, such as small participant numbers, are acknowledged. Implications for the education sector, such as the usefulness of peer support and the importance of TLSAs having an authentic voice within the school community, are discussed.

**3.2 Introduction**

***The background of teaching and learning support in the UK***

A range of legislation and policy changes have shaped the role of Teaching and Learning Support Assistants (hereafter, TLSAs) within the United Kingdom (UK). The Education Act (1996) brought together previous laws surrounding education and set out the legal framework for supporting children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Following this, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) (2001) outlined clearer anti-discriminatory frameworks for supporting SEN and brought further protection for children and young people by stating the requirements for inclusive education rather than solely focussing on assessment and provision which had been done by its predecessor: the Education Act (1996). In addition to the introduction of the SENDA (2001), there were a range of policy changes which impacted the education workforce such as The Raising Standards and Tackling Workload: A National Agreement (Department for Education, 2003). This agreement led to an increase in the number of TLSAs employed within education settings to improve teachers' work-life balance as TLSAs were able to foot many administrative-related duties that were previously the sole responsibility of teachers. Furthermore, this led to the development of the role of 'Higher Level Teaching Assistants' (HLTAs) whose role mirrored a TLSA. However, in addition, they could also cover pre-agreed responsibilities for teaching and learning under relevant supervision as well as monitoring and assessing children's progress and development (NAPTA, 2016); all of which was supposedly beyond what would be expected of a main grade TLSA.

In addition, the Every Child Matters Green Paper (2004) introduced policy that aimed to strengthen the working relationships between the education, health and social care sectors. Whilst TLSAs were not explicitly mentioned, the Every Child Matters Green paper highlighted the need for children and young people to access early intervention support and brought attention to the accountability of all education staff. All of the aforementioned laws and policies contributed to an increase in TLSA employment aimed at promoting children and

young people's access to high-quality educational experiences. Given the increase in TLSAs, the UK Department for Education commissioned an investigation into the impact of such investment: the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) research project. This longitudinal research which was conducted between 2003 and 2009 (Blatchford et al., 2009) found limited positive findings for the effectiveness of TLSAs, solely via their presence in schools, and highlighted factors (such as consideration of how TLSAs were deployed) which needed to be addressed in order to maximise the impact of TLSA support.

Information about support staff in the UK began to be gathered in 2011 to enable a clearer picture of the education workforce to be gained. As of 2023, there were 282,900 full-time TLSAs employed in the UK, a 28% increase since the initial census data of 2011. Primary school settings employ 69% of this workforce (Department of Education, 2023). Information specifically about the number of HLTAs within education settings is not currently documented, meaning that the ratio of TLSAs to HLTAs is uncertain.

### *The role of a TLSA in the current context*

In the current context of 2025, the role of a TLSA is vastly different to what it was in the early 2000s when the previously discussed policies and legal frameworks were introduced. In addition to the increase in the number of people employed as TLSAs over the years, the breadth and expectations associated with the role have also increased (CFE Research, 2024). Today, in addition to administrative duties such as supporting teachers to create and gather resources for lessons, TLSAs are often also required to directly support children with their learning, social and emotional development and manage challenging behavioural communication, all of which were previously duties more exclusively assigned to HLTAs. Research has identified that TLSAs' roles can invariably change daily and the exact expectations vary across settings (Benstead, 2021). This means that it is difficult to clearly define the role and associated responsibilities (Vardy et al., 2025). Interestingly, a disparity between what TLSAs are contracted to do and what they actually find themselves engaged with has also been identified in other countries such as Spain (Jardí et al., 2018). In line with

the responsibilities of TLSAs changing, the title of the role has also altered over time. Whereas once nearly all individuals employed in such roles were known as 'Teaching Assistants', nowadays, individuals are also commonly employed under the title of 'Learning Support Assistants' and 'Learning Partners', amongst other related titles. This shift in role title seems linear to the role duties changing from individuals being employed as a direct assistant to the class teacher to a member of the staff team who is more directly involved in helping children with learning (CFE Research, 2024).

TLSAs have been identified to have a large remit of responsibility and often need to draw on skills similar to those of teachers. In 2024, 70% of primary school-employed respondents ($n$ = 5,989) reported covering whole class teaching for a minimum of one hour to a maximum of seven hours per week. Moreover, 50% of TLSAs working across primary, secondary and special schools shared that they did not have a lesson plan or support from another TLSA when delivering such lessons (Webster, 2024). This, arguably, makes this element of their role more challenging than that experienced by a qualified teacher as they are less likely to have received pedagogic knowledge through formal approaches, such as teacher training (CFE Research, 2024), and are less likely to be able to access the support of an additional adult such as a TLSA. Furthermore, Sharples and colleagues (2015) made recommendations that TLSAs should add value and complement what teachers do, rather than replace them; therefore, it is somewhat concerning that research facilitated almost a decade later identified a high proportion of TLSAs reported having a high degree of responsibility within the classroom. Given the wide scope of teaching and learning involvement that TLSAs can have, they will undoubtedly need to draw upon pedagogic skills and approaches to ensure they support children's development and facilitate opportunities for them to be active agents within the learning process. Alongside supporting children with their learning, TLSAs are often required to support the social and emotional needs of children and young people (CFE Research, 2024), again, often without formal training or access to ongoing support.

Despite the skills and knowledge that individuals are likely to need for the role, TLSAs

Teaching and Learning Support in Statutory Education

will not necessarily have accessed the relevant training (Eyres et al., 2010). A large-scale

study involving 6,000 TLSAs across primary, secondary and special schools (CFE Research,

2024) found considerable variation in TLSAs' qualification levels. Specifically, 18% (one in

six) of participants had not attained qualifications above Level 2 (GCSE or equivalent) whilst

63% of participants held a relevant qualification to the TLSA role such as a Level 2 or 3 in

Teaching and Learning in Schools, Level 3 Diploma in Childcare and Education or had

completed a Teaching Assistant apprenticeship or HLTA qualification. These qualifications

were most prevalent amongst primary school-employed TLSAs. Interestingly, 32% of the

participant pool reported holding a degree-level qualification and these TLSAs were more

likely to be employed in a secondary school setting (CFE Research, 2024). This research

highlights the range of formally acquired knowledge within the TLSA workforce despite it

being one of the lowest-paying public sector jobs (Antoniazzi, 2023)

***Socio-political factors impacting TLSAs***

In addition to the varied responsibilities of TLSAs, education staff are currently

confronted with several challenges, including those brought about by the COVID-19

pandemic, multiple changes of relevant cabinet ministers (which resulted in varying

approaches towards budget allocations) and the current cost-of-living crisis (Lucas et al.,

2023). The rising cost-of-living has also significantly impacted the recruitment and retention

of school staff (Alston, 2023). Recent research identified that 71% of primary school senior

leaders felt that TLSAs are leaving their role because they can earn higher wages elsewhere

(Lucas et al., 2023) with supermarkets cited as offering better pay and greater flexibility

(Fazackerley, 2022). The combination of the cost-of-living crisis (Lucas et al., 2023), cuts in

government funding, staff shortages, shrinking school budgets, and increased expectations

of the TLSA role, has led to declining retention and recruitment rates not only among TLSAs

but also within the teaching profession generally (National Education Union, 2024). It has

been argued that the shortages have resulted in a heavier workload for the remaining

education staff, likely exacerbating the recruitment and retention problem (Webster, 2024).

Teaching and Learning Support in Statutory Education

Despite the extra demands on and need for TLSAs, many report job insecurity; 53% of TLSAs shared that their job security was either little, none, or unknown (NCFE, 2023). It has been reported that TLSAs report feeling 'forced out' of their roles because of insufficient pay (Fazackerley, 2022, 2023) and research by NCFE (2023) identified that 73% of 150 TLSAs surveyed had considered changing careers or were actively looking for alternative roles. However, concerns about job insecurity are not new. UNISON (2013) highlight this as a persistent problem which likely contributes to higher levels of stress and poorer well-being amongst TLSAs. In 2024, Webster identified that the poor pay correlated with a low sense of worth in the workplace. A recent study highlighted that TLSAs report experiencing higher stress levels than normative data from the UK, with factors such as 'control' and 'job demands' positively correlating with perceived stress (Ravalier et al. 2021). However, with the exception of Ravalier et al.'s (2021) study, research specifically exploring TLSAs' well-being is limited.   Despite the significant support TLSAs offer both to colleagues and children, only 1 in 10 TLSAs perceived their role to be highly respected and valued whereas 49% felt that the role was 'not very' or 'not' respected at all (NCFE, 2023). The belief that one's role is not highly valued by others is likely to negatively impact one's well-being. The Job-Demands Resource (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001) proposes that an imbalance between job-related demands (e.g., workload) and job resources (e.g., extrinsic recognition such as financial remuneration or support from colleagues) can lead to decreased motivation and burnout. Burnout is connected to poor well-being and has been defined as a psychological phenomenon which is characterised by psychological exhaustion, reduced sense of personal accomplishment and depersonalisation and can occur in those who work in people-facing roles (Maslach et al., 1997). In contrast, 'resources' from the perspective of the JD-R model are thought to lead to experiences of motivation and have been identified to increase work engagement which involves a sense of absorption, enthusiasm and immersion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Considered together, the aforementioned research highlights that TLSAs face a multitude of challenges that likely influence and impact their well-being, job

satisfaction and overall quality of life and, as a result, these factors may be key to understanding the current challenges with both recruitment and retention of TLSAs.

### *The concept and importance of well-being*

As previously discussed, The Raising Standards and Tackling Workload: A National Agreement (Department for Education, 2003) acknowledged the high workloads placed on teachers and this led to the recruitment of TLSAs to help manage this challenge. However, poor well-being amongst professionals working within the sector still seems to prevail. In 2023, it was identified that 86% of primary school staff reported experiencing stress at work (Education Support, 2023). Whilst this statistic reflects the experience of a range of primary-school employed educational staff, it is not possible to disentangle the state of well-being exclusively within the TLSA population. The current challenges surrounding poor well-being in the education sector mirror previous concerns recognised within the teaching profession which the SENDA (2003) also aimed to address. Arguably, the pressures once placed exclusively on teachers have similarly impacted TLSAs as their responsibilities have begun to overlap. Consequently, it is not surprising that research has found that TLSAs themselves experience high levels of work-related stress (Ravalier et al., 2021).

Research has shown that supervision and peer support groups have been identified as beneficial for teachers (Gardner et al., 2022), designated safeguarding leads (Stokes et al., 2023) and Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) (France & Billington, 2020; Osborne & Burton, 2014). Such support has been identified to offer emotional support (France & Billington, 2020), help develop working relationships (Osborne & Burton, 2014), improve attendees' sense of agency and empowerment (Gardner et al., 2022), as well as increase their well-being and confidence within their role (Stokes et al., 2023). However, despite these documented benefits for individuals working within school-based roles such as teachers and ELSAs, there is no evidence that similar support has been implemented specifically for TLSAs who are not fulfilling an additional role, such as ELSA. Therefore, considering the multiple benefits that peer support groups and supervision have shown to

lead to, there is a call for similar support to be piloted with TLSAs.

The concept of well-being has changed over time due to advancements within the research field and greater understanding of the factors which may influence the construct. Early definitions focussed on the key importance of an absence of illness (World Health Organisation, 1948). However, it is now more common for definitions to encompass social, emotional and psychological aspects too (Huppert, 2009), in acknowledgement of important 'psychological desiderata' (Lomas & VanderWeele, 2023). Researchers have conceptualised a range of definitions in an attempt to identify a clear explanation of well-being such as highlighting the various components including: 'emotional', (Park et al., 2022), 'psychological', and 'subjective' well-being (Sirgy, 2012). However, despite a wealth of research, to date, there is no universally agreed definition (Jarden & Roache, 2023). Defining well-being, much like experiencing the phenomenon itself, remains subjective and susceptible to academic debate (VanderWheele & Lomas, 2022). Moreover, 'workplace well-being' (the well-being that individuals experience specifically within the workplace) has been identified as central to the sustainability of organisations and influences overall workplace performance (Aryanti & Sari, 2020). This area is also subject to similar definition challenges (Bautista et al., 2023).

There is a range of schools of thought about what influences well-being. As well as being influenced by the contexts that individuals are in, research has highlighted that differences in individuals' life experiences have effects on cognition and well-being (Luhmann et al., 2014). Furthermore, an individual's disposition to form affective concepts, such as appreciation, can also impact well-being (Adler & Fagley, 2005). These two key research findings illustrate the complexity of well-being and demonstrate how it is a multi-faceted concept which can be influenced by a plethora of factors. In particular, the Human Potential Movement (HPM) of the 1960s is influenced by the branch of humanistic psychology (Schneider, 2001) and it brought attention to the power of personal growth and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). The concept of eudemonic well-being gained momentum through the HPM as it offers a perspective which is connected to self-realisation through

personal growth and being true to oneself (Norton, 1976) which can offer purpose, meaning and direction in one's life (Waterman, 1993). The concept of hedonic well-being, whilst not connected to the HPM, is concerned with the presence of pleasure and the avoidance of suffering. Whilst eudemonic and hedonic well-being are separate constructs which lead to different types of fulfilment, they have been identified to intersect (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Positive Psychology is underpinned by both hedonic and eudemonic perspectives as it aims to better understand and promote human flourishing and not just prevent suffering or avoid challenge (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2011). Seligman (2011) proposed the theory of PERMA as a framework for conceptualising well-being through five key domains which are thought to comprise psychological well-being: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. It is acknowledged that these five domains cannot yield positive experiences at all times. However, if an individual can nurture each of the five areas of PERMA, it is posited that they can experience positive well-being and 'flourish'. According to Seligman (2011), the concept of 'flourishing' is defined as a state of people experiencing positive emotions, functioning 'well' socially and psychologically and feeling that they are fulfilling a life of purpose and meaning.

PERMA has been researched within teacher populations across Western countries. In 2021, Crider investigated teachers' ($n$ = 5), experiences of the PERMA factors through semi-structured interviews and journal entries in the United States of America. This research aimed to investigate the influence that the PERMA pillars had on participants' approaches to teaching and identified that teachers flourished when they felt engaged, had positive relationships, felt a sense of achievement and perceived themselves to be effective in their role. One of the key implications identified within this research was that it seemed key to ensure that teachers are empowered to take a lead on their well-being, as well as be able to access information about wellness, as this was identified to have positive outcomes on their experiences and output within their working role. Kern et al. (2014) investigated the applicability of the PERMA framework with the aim of forming a measure which assessed the PERMA pillars. Within this research, they utilised a range of questionnaires, all of which

aimed to measure PERMA-related constructs. The researchers carried out factor analysis on the results from the range of surveys which were deemed to be theoretically relevant, to inform their conceptualisation of the 'PERMA Profiler' (Butler & Kern, 2016). This is a Likert scale measure which encapsulates 15 questions which were derived from other measures, as well as a further 8 items which were added to capture participants' state of loneliness, physical health, negative emotion, and overall well-being as these were thought to be key for one's overall well-being too. To inform the PERMA Profiler, the research was carried out with staff in an Australian school ($n = 153$). 60% of participants were teaching staff and 40% were non-teaching staff; however, TLSAs were not explicitly mentioned to be part of either sub-group. Kern et al., (2014) identified that staff members who reported higher levels of well-being across the five PERMA domains also reported greater overall life satisfaction, better health, and greater commitment to the school.

Interestingly, within their research, it was identified that Engagement and Relationships were specifically related to job satisfaction and organisational commitment, highlighting the influence that well-being factors can have in shaping workplace experiences and outcomes. These correlations prompted the researchers to note the potential usefulness of the PERMA Profiler being adapted specifically for workplace well-being (Kern, 2014) and led to the development of the Workplace PERMA Profiler. Although this version of the profiler was not formally published in a journal, guidance is available online.

To date, a small pool of international research has utilised the Workplace PERMA Profiler with a range of job roles. None of these studies have specifically focussed on education professionals. Research which does exist has included investigations in Japan (Watanabe et al., 2018) ($n = 310$) and Korea (Choi et al., 2019) ($n = 316$). The papers respectively noted 'adequate' to 'good' internal validity and reported the Workplace PERMA Profiler as useful for ascertaining the state of well-being and bringing attention to certain pillars of well-being that employees would benefit from being supported with. Therefore, whilst limited research utilising the Workplace PERMA Profiler exists, it has not yet been solely utilised for ascertaining the well-being of education staff at a UK or international level.

***This current research***

Beyond the Workplace PERMA Profiler, there is an overall dearth of research investigating the well-being of UK primary school-employed TLSAs. Considering existing socio-political and economic pressures, together with the complex demands and responsibilities of being a TLSA in the UK in 2025, this current study has several aims in an attempt to answer a number of currently unanswered questions within this research field. The national survey will first explore how TLSAs conceptualise workplace well-being. Secondly, utilising a combination of the Workplace PERMA Profiler questionnaire and open-ended questions, this research will attempt to measure the well-being level of TLSAs and gather deeper insights into what supports or challenges this. The quantitative data will provide more structured insights into well-being trends amongst TLSAs nationally whilst the qualitative responses will give deeper insights into how TLSAs interpret their well-being and make sense of their circumstances. Thirdly, this study will pilot the usefulness of peer support groups for TLSAs to explore the potential usefulness of such an approach for supporting TLSAs' workplace well-being.

This series of studies will focus on investigating primary school TLSAs' well-being from a positive psychology perspective, as a previous study (Ravalier et al., 2021) found that primary school TLSAs reported a greater number of negative impacts of work on their well-being compared to colleagues in specialist and secondary schools. It is hoped that the findings of this current study will provide a well-informed understanding of the current state of TLSA well-being including identification of internal and external factors which contribute to this concept. In addition, this research seeks to outline implications for school staff and Educational Psychologists offering insights to enhance support for the TLSA sector.

## 3.3 Methodology

The study comprised two parts: a national scoping survey open to all UK-based TLSAs employed within the primary education sector to measure their well-being, and a pilot

Teaching and Learning Support in Statutory Education

project exploring the impact of facilitated peer support groups on TLSAs in two UK primary schools.

### 3.3.1 Design

A mixed methods design was adopted. Two strands of this project enabled addressing a set of separate research questions which collectively provide a better understanding of the well-being of TLSAs currently working in UK primary schools. The two data collection streams were collected at overlapping time periods. The data for Study 1 was collected between April and October 2024 and the peer support groups were delivered between May - December 2024).

*Research Questions for the mixed methods national survey (Study 1):*

- *What are the levels of workplace well-being that TLSAs report nationally?*

- *According to the views and lived experiences of TLSAs nationwide, what are the key factors that affect their workplace well-being?*

- *What resources and support do TLSAs draw upon to enable them to both obtain and sustain their well-being?*

*Research Question for the peer-support pilot project (Study 2)*

- *What are TLSAs' lived experiences of engaging with a peer support group, facilitated by a trainee Educational Psychologist for one hour, once per month for six months?*

**Researcher's Position and Analytical Approach to Quantitative Elements**

A mixed methodological approach was taken in this research as the researcher hoped to be able to investigate factors which contributed to TLSAs' well-being through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. It was felt that both types of data collection would give valuable data to address and match the different research questions posed. Due to the methodological differences, two epistemological positions were simultaneously held, known as epistemological pluralism (Frost & Nolas, 2011). For the quantitative elements of the research, across both Study 1 and Study 2, the researcher held a critical realist position

because this acknowledges that numerical measures can be a helpful approach for identifying patterns (Bhaskar, 1975) in concepts that we believe to be real/universal, but hard to observe. It is also important to note that such approaches do not offer a thorough understanding of why the data may have occurred (Bhaskar, 1975). Therefore, acknowledging the limits that critical realism posits, the quantitative approach to analysis was adopted in conjunction with qualitative methods to explore the manner in which the concept of 'well-being' was experienced by participants both individually and collectively.

**The Workplace PERMA Profiler**

Both strands of the research utilised The Workplace PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2014) to quantitatively assess TLSAs' overall well-being within their workplace in combination with a set of qualitative questions. The Workplace PERMA Profiler is a 23-item, 11-point Likert scale measure (Appendix J) designed to assess the five key areas of well-being as outlined by Seligman (2011). In addition, the measure includes scales for Negative Emotion and Health as both factors have been shown to correlate closely with 'flourishing' (Butler & Kern, 2016). As highlighted, whilst research has investigated the reliability and validity of the PERMA Profiler and Workplace PERMA Profiler, UK-based research is more limited.

Kern (2025) outlined guidance as to what scores obtained through the Workplace PERMA Profiler meant from a conceptual perspective (i.e., what constitutes 'good' well-being). Importantly, whilst this guidance outlines what the researchers have constructed to correlate with different levels of 'well-being functioning', it is also acknowledged that a numerical score should not be used as a diagnostic reference or as absolute. Instead, such a score may help ascertain how well-being within the researched population compares to the means from the validation studies (Butler & Kern, 2016). Within Butler and Kern's (2016) research into the PERMA Profiler, Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.71 (negative emotion) to 0.94 (for overall well-being). Translated into Japanese, the measure showed adequate reliability and validity (Cronbach's alphas ranging from 0.75 for relationships, to 0.96 - overall well-being) when utilised with 310 participants who worked in education and a variety of other sectors (Wantanebe et al., 2018). Research conducted in Korea (Choi et al., 2019) ($n =$

316) found similar Cronbach's alphas which ranged from 0.70 (accomplishment) to 0.95 (overall well-being), highlighting similar results to those identified within the Japanese-based research. A meta-analysis by Jimenez and colleagues (2024), identified that the factor of engagement ($a$ = 0.69) did not meet a 0.70 reliability threshold. This threshold has been identified to be regarded as 'acceptable' for internal consistency and reliability (George & Mallery, 2019). Similar findings for the pillar of Engagement ($a$ = 0.66) were also found by Ryan and colleagues (2019). This led to the researchers highlighting that future work will need to be carried out to increase the measure's internal consistency (Jimenez et al., 2024). Given that there is some disparity amongst researchers about the internal consistency of the Workplace PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2014), this current study will add additional research findings to the currently limited body of research.

**Researcher's Position and Analytical Approach to Qualitative Elements**

In line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) guidance, this research adopted an interpretivist position when analysing the qualitative data from both the survey and post-peer support groups. The researcher aimed to understand the current context of the role of a TLSA in the UK by interpreting the written qualitative responses through inductive coding. The process of coding for the post-peer support group programme data was coded deductively to see if the participants' experiences aligned with the best hopes that participants who had taken part in the national scoping survey had outlined.

Such an interpretivist approach also acknowledges the researcher's own position as a trainee educational psychologist and previous TLSA who, therefore, comes to the research with their own experiences and perceptions of the context (Creswell & Porth, 2018). The mixed methods approach was chosen as it enabled the researcher to identify structured insights into the TLSAs' self-reported well-being via the Workplace PERMA Profiler and consider how this aligns with Cronbach's alpha scores that have been identified within other professions (Butler & Kern, 2016). In addition, it was felt that to capture the nuance and potential complexity of well-being and, in line with guidance from Kern (2025), several

opportunities to share qualitative information about their well-being would be key in supporting the researcher to understand how the TLSAs conceptualised and made sense of well-being as well as discern what resources and support they draw upon to obtain and sustain this construct.

***Study 1: The National Survey***

### 3.3.2 Procedure (Study 1)

The National Survey, available through an online platform (Qualtrics™), was shared directly with schools and advertised on social media. The survey was open to participants between April and October 2024. The Workplace PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2014) was combined with a set of questions to gather demographic information and further qualitative detail about TLSAs' current experiences (Appendix K). The qualitative questions aimed to explore the protective factors that TLSAs were drawing upon to support their well-being. These questions included: *'What steps, if any, has your workplace taken to support your well-being?'* and *'What steps, both in and outside of work, have you taken to support your own well-being?',* with an additional question to prompt reflection: *'What has helped/hindered in establishing these?'.*

A subset of the quantitative findings are presented within the main body of the results. Interpretations of all of the qualitative questions are presented within the thematic analysis and content analysis sections of the results.

### 3.3.3 Participants (Study 1)

178 participants from the United Kingdom completed the survey. Participants represented a wide demographic of the United Kingdom (Table 5). The majority identified as female (89.89%) with 7.30% identifying as male, 1.69% as non-binary and 1.12% preferred not to say. The length of time participants had worked in their current TLSA role ranged from 1 month to 35 years and 4 months ($M$ = 7 years and 1 month, $SD$ = 7 years and 3 months). 40.45% ($n$ = 72) reported they had previously worked as a TLSA in a different school,

Teaching and Learning Support in Statutory Education

highlighting a diverse range of professional experience within the sample.

Participants reported different role titles as their current employment. 65.17% were

employed as a Teaching Assistant, 34.27% as a Learning Support Assistant, and 0.56% ($n$ =

1) did not specify their role title.

**Table 5**

*Percentage of Participants from Each Region of the UK*

| Region | Percentage of Participants |
|---|---|
| East of England | 1.69% |
| London | 12.92% |
| Midlands | 12.36% |
| North East | 3.37% |
| North West | 6.74% |
| Scotland | 1.12% |
| South East | 35.39% |
| South West | 24.16% |
| Wales | .56% |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 1.69% |

***Study 2: Peer Support Groups Pilot***

**3.3.4 Procedure (Study 2)**

Schools were recruited via an opportunity sampling approach. The lead researcher

contacted school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCos) in settings which they

had a professional working connection. To be eligible to offer the peer support groups within

their schools, the SENCo needed to commit to providing a suitable space for the groups and

commit to enabling TLSAs to have one hour per month, for six months to attend the support

sessions.

When inviting schools to participate, the researcher shared the recruitment poster with

the SENCo along with a document that outlined the commitment that would need to be given

by the school's SLT. The project was offered free of charge. Out of the five schools

contacted, two agreed to take part. The other three settings were unable to commit due to staff shortages and classroom demands which meant they could not reliably enable staff to join the sessions for the required time.

Participant information sheets and consent forms for the TLSAs were sent to the two interested schools. Upon return of these, dates for running the groups were agreed on a monthly basis (exclusive of school holidays) between May and December 2024. Six sessions were facilitated per school and each lasted between 50-70 minutes. Within the sessions, a commonly employed group supervision structure was followed. This involved an emotional check-in, agenda setting, discussion of items raised and then a check-out activity (see Appendix L for the full session format). A specific model of supervision, such as Solution Circles (Forrest et al., 1996), was not followed as the researcher hoped to follow an informal structure that they had previously observed colleagues adopt. This offered flexibility which was felt to be vital given that the peer support groups aimed to support the TLSAs' well-being. Importantly, the principles of solution-focused practice (Dolan, 2023) and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957), were upheld across the sessions.

Participants in the peer support groups completed the Workplace PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2014) before their first session (in parallel to Study 1's national survey). This was repeated during their last session, during which the TLSAs also responded to a paper-based set of additional qualitative questions to gain a richer understanding of their experiences. These questions included: *'Reflecting on the TA/LSA peer support group meetings, what was the experience like for you?'* and *'What did you value most about your experience in the TA/LSA peer support groups?'.* Participants were also asked to choose what preferred term they would like for future groups (e.g., peer support groups or TA/LSA reflective spaces). A range of the quantitative findings are presented within the main body of the results (see Appendix M for all of the questions asked of the peer support group participants). Interpretations of all of the qualitative questions are presented within the thematic analysis and content analysis sections of the results.

### 3.3.5 Participants (Study 2)

Seven participants from two schools in the South East of England were initially involved in the peer support groups (female $n = 6$ and male $n = 1$). The groups were facilitated independently of one another within the individual schools ($n = 3$, $n = 4$), meaning that the participants were grouped with their respective colleagues. Two participants left the peer support programme early due to changes in their work circumstances; this meant that five participants ($n = 3$, $n = 2$) completed all aspects of the programme. Only the five participants who completed the pilot programme are included in the analyses. The five participants worked as a TLSA for an average of 6.25 years, ($SD = 4.89$), with a range of 6 months to 12 years.

Both Study 1 and Study 2 received ethical approval through the University of Southampton's Research and Ethics Governance Committee (ERGO number: 90697).

## 3.4 Analysis

## 3.4.1 Study 1

### 3.4.1.1 Quantitative analysis for the National Survey

In addition to the geographical region that participants worked in, further details about their employment were obtained to contextualise the participant pool. In acknowledgement that TLSAs often work in an additional role to being a TLSA, the employment status of the participants is displayed in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*The Employment Status of Participants*

| Employment status | Percentage of participants ($N = 178$) |
|---|---|
| Full-time (also work in another role) | 7.87% |
| Full-time (this is the only employment) | 53.93% |
| Part-time (work in another role) | 6.74% |
| Part-time (this is the only employment) | 31.46% |

For those who reported working another job at the same time as their TLSA role, there were a range of secondary employment arrangements which included supermarket, care, optometry and travel agency work.

97.75% ($n$ = 174) of participants responded to a question posed about their employer type. Of these 174 participants, 57.47% ($n$ = 100) worked for a local authority-maintained primary school and 42.53% ($n$ = 74) of participants were employed by an academy-maintained primary school. Participants worked in a range of localities (Table 7) and reported serving a number of different socio-economic areas (Table 8).

**Table 7**

*Type of Locality Participants Reported their School was Based in*

| Locality area | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| An inner city | 12.92% |
| Large town | 13.48% |
| Outskirts of a city | 21.35% |
| Small town | 33.71% |
| Village | 18.54% |

**Table 8**

*Type of Socio-Economic Status-Serving Settings Participants Reported Working in*

| Levels of affluence | Percentage |
| --- | --- |
| Highly affluent | 5.06% |
| Moderately affluent | 19.66% |
| Middle class | 33.15% |
| Low income | 34.27% |
| Highly deprived | 7.30% |
| Did not specify | 0.56% |

In relation to additional responsibilities, 14.04% shared that they were an ELSA, 2.25% were Therapeutic Active Listening Assistants and 34.27% shared that they were a qualified first aider. Of the total 178 participants, 73.03% ($n$ = 130) shared that they had additional responsibilities which did not fall into the pre-determined categories of the survey.

Teaching and Learning Support in Statutory Education

Of these 130 participants, 6.15% (*n* = 8) shared that they offer some form of speech and language support, 4.62% (*n* = 6) shared that they worked as a Higher-Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA), 4.62% (*n* = 6) were Mental Health First Aiders, and 3.08% (*n* = 4) were Deputy Safeguarding Leads.

When asked how long, on average, they took for break times during their working day, the mean amount of time TLSAs reported was 35.01 minutes (*SD* = 20.07). The responses ranged from zero minutes to one hundred and eighty minutes; showing a high range of variation amongst participants. However, it must be acknowledged that those who reported a higher amount of time may have had a planned break within their employment, for example, some TLSAs may finish their employment at lunchtime and then return to support children and young people at after-school clubs.

## PERMA Results for the National Survey

Mean scores for the individual subscales were calculated, together with standard deviations for the five pillars of PERMA and the additional factors of Health and Negative Emotion. Of the 178 participants who completed the online survey, 161 completed the Workplace PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2014). Information available on the Workplace PERMA Profiler webpage (Kern, 2025), provides some guidance for interpretation (Table 9):

**Table 9**

*Terminology and Associated Scores for Well-Being Functioning (Kern, 2025)*

| Apparent 'functioning' | Score thought to connect to the functioning type |
|---|---|
| Very high functioning | 9 + (0-1 for negative emotion) |
| High functioning | 8 - 8.9 (1.1 to 3 for negative emotion) |
| Normal functioning | 6.5 - 7.9 (3 to 5 for negative emotion) |
| Sub-optimal functioning | 5 - 6.4 (5.1 to 6.5 for negative emotion) |
| Languishing | Below 5 (6.5 and above for negative emotion) |

The results for the Workplace PERMA Profiler element of the national survey are presented in Table 10.

**Table 10**

*Means, Standard Deviations and Cronbach's Alpha for the Workplace PERMA Profiler for the National Survey*

| Subscale | *M* | *SD* | *α* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive Emotion (P) | 6.42 | 2.02 | .92 |
| Engagement (E) | 7.00 | 1.80 | .68 |
| Relationships (R) | 6.77 | 2.15 | .85 |
| Meaning (M) | 7.46 | 1.88 | .82 |
| Accomplishment (A) | 7.04 | 1.73 | .80 |
| Overall Well-being score | 6.92 | 1.69 | .85 |
| Health | 6.21 | 2.31 | .91 |
| Negative Emotion | 4.60 | 2.26 | .74 |

**Qualitative Results**

**3.4.1.2 Qualitative analysis for the National Survey**

Participants' written survey responses were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to enable the researcher to form an understanding of the experiences that participants had shared. The RTA was divided into three parts: firstly, participants' responses concerning their conceptualisation of well-being; secondly, the participants' responses which detailed their lived experiences of working within the TLSA role and the support that they draw upon; and thirdly, when participants in the national survey shared something that they hoped would change in their role (i.e., feeling more connected to their colleagues). The third part of the RTA data analysis from the national survey led to the conceptualisation of two themes: Time to Connect with Colleagues and Desire for Advancing Knowledge, Skills and Resources. These two themes were then used as a codebook for analysing the qualitative responses given by the peer support group participants in Study 2. This enabled links to be established between what the national survey participants hoped for with the responses that the peer support group participants shared they had experienced.

<div align="center">**Qualitative Results - Part One**</div>

### 3.4.1.3 Conceptualisation of Well-Being

The responses from the national survey data for the first qualitative question *What does the term 'well-being' mean for you in your working life?* were coded independently from the rest of the data so that a better understanding of how TLSAs conceptualise the concept of well-being could be developed.

The responses gathered were conceptualised into five key factors: *overall wellness, sense of community, sense of purpose, positive affective experience* and *support and sustainability.*

**Overall Wellness**

Participants explicitly referred to mental and physical health and the absence of stress as central to their overall well-being: "being happy and healthy, mentally and physically" (P78), *"that my mental and physical health are equally important and healthy"* (P62) and *"not stressed or worried"* (P99); suggesting that they felt the mind-body connection was important for well-being.

**Sense of Community**

Participants also reflected on the importance of belonging to their school community. This seemingly involved having positive connections with colleagues: *"having meaningful and fulfilling relationships with coworkers and supervisors"* (P32). In addition, feeling a sense of inclusion and equality *"experiencing a sense of belonging and inclusion in the workplace"* (P28) and feeling heard *"able to share emotions/experiences with colleagues and to support each other in good and difficult times"* (P71) were identified as important.

**Sense of Purpose**

Participants highlighted the importance of feeling that they are making a meaningful contribution in their workplace, which they viewed as vital for their conceptualisation of well-being at work: *"knowing I am making a difference"* and *"feeling you are contributing positively to school"* (P35)*.* Furthermore, a sense of motivation and progress was emphasised, with

some participants noting the significance of *"feeling motivated"* (P29) and *"progress(ing)*

*towards my goals"* (P44).

**Positive Affective Experience**

Participants reflected on a range of affective factors that they perceived to be central to

their well-being at work. These included feeling satisfaction towards their role *"satisfied in the*

*job I am doing"* (P76), feeling valued, appreciated and respected *"feeling supported and*

*valued within my role" (P79) and "trusted to do my job without being questioned"* (P83).

Finally, a sense of both contentment and pride was also noted as key: *"a general feeling of*

*assurance, confidence and contentment"* (P74) and *"experiencing a sense of pride"* (P34).

**Support and Sustainability**

The final theme connected participants' comments about their perceived need for

access to internal and external resources to help them in their role: *"feeling that I can cope"*

(P23), *"feeling supported in times of professional challenges and setbacks" (*P45) and

*"having the support and resources to navigate challenges…"* (P74). Additionally, participants

highlighted the importance of maintaining balance in their workload for their well-being,

commenting on the need for a sustainable workload, *"amount of work expected is at a*

*sustainable level"* (P36), and clear boundaries between work and personal life, *"ensure that*

*workload is not overtaking personal life"* (P65). Finally, participants commented on ensuring

that the parameters of what is expected of their role were recognised vis-à-vis workload by

themselves and others *"balancing workload and expectations of my role"* (P33).

<div align="center">

**Qualitative Results – Part Two**

</div>

### 3.4.1.4 The Key Factors, Resources and Support that Contribute to TLSA Well-Being

The remaining qualitative data gathered through the national survey was also inductively

coded using RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to answer the following two research questions:

- *According to the views and lived experiences of TLSAs nationwide, what are the key*
  *factors that affect their workplace well-being?*

- *What resources and support do TLSAs draw upon to enable them to both obtain and sustain their well-being?*

Through the process of RTA, five themes and twelve subthemes were formed as shown in Figure 3. The themes are related to: *power of connection, the impact of challenge, the vital role of TLSAs, low sense of worth within the school community and fulfilment and flourishing.* All of the themes have illustrative quotes forming their titles within the main body. Within the write-up, some quotes are utilised more than once as these were noted to be relevant for more than one theme; this illustrates the particular interconnectedness between the interpretations made.

**Figure 3**

*Thematic Map Depicting the Qualitative Results from the National Survey*

**3.4.1.5 Themes identified through Reflexive Thematic Analysis**

**3.4.1.5.1 Power of Connection:** *"Having good and support[ive] relations[hips] with my team is definitely the main thing that supports my wellbeing"*

This theme explores participants' reflections about relationships within their staff teams which they felt contributed to a positive sense of well-being. It is divided into two subthemes: Positive connections with colleagues and Feeling valued and appreciated.

**Positive connections with colleagues**

Participants noted that being kept informed and having regular opportunities for support from colleagues seemed key for forming positive connections: *"my teacher in Y2 is the best support and friend to me that I could have asked for. She always keeps me up to date with what is going on…'* (P156). *"The staff members that I work closely with have been fantastic. They check on me throughout the day and are always there for me to talk to"* (P21). Another participant wrote: *"members of staff make it clear they are available to support colleagues where they can"* (P92).

There was also explicit mention of positive connections with SLTs: *"the class teacher [is] also a member of SLT [and] takes time to chat with us all frequently to check in with us and see if there's anything we need"* (P101), *"our current head has always had an 'open door' policy and is very approachable. In general, I feel very well looked after by management and all other colleagues"* (P60).

The connections with colleagues were described as important during both difficult and celebratory times; this is particularly important as all life events contribute to well-being: *"Having support from colleagues makes up for everything. Sharing things, niggles, laughs, etc."* (P7).

> *There is a very supportive atmosphere across the school, we celebrate each other's wins and life events. People support each other when they face personal challenges too. Small things like the Head (teacher) makes sure she says hello to everyone every day* (P74).

One participant even reflected on how their relationship with the class teacher impacted their work performance: *"the nicer the teacher, the more you want to do for them as a TA."* (P156), suggesting that positive connections may also impact motivation and engagement.

**Feeling valued and appreciated**

Many participants wrote about experiencing feelings of value and appreciation, noting the impact that this had on their self-concept. It seemed that positive connections with colleagues, together with opportunities for growth and development, existed in parallel to such positive experiences: *"the SLT include LSAs in regular CPD alongside teachers. It makes me feel valued"* (P68), demonstrating the value that involving TLSAs in processes such as training could contribute to an individual's sense of worth within the school community. In addition, another participant reflected on how they appreciated others seeking their support: *"I feel appreciated by staff and the children know they can come to me for help. I feel my opinions matter and are important"* (P179).

Another participant wrote about how they found small gestures supportive for their well-being: *"colleagues who simply say thank you for your help today have made a massive difference to my mental health"* (P164).

The range of experiences that TLSAs reflected on suggests that being included, feeling that they can make a meaningful contribution, and experiencing a sense of appreciation, all positively contributed to their employment experience and overall well-being.

**3.4.1.5.2 The Impact of Challenge**: ***"There are good people trying to do their best amidst chaos and lack of money"***

Throughout the responses, there were reflections about the range of challenges encountered within the TLSA role. Whilst some participants reported positive experiences, others reflected on negative encounters and the impact that these had on their overall well-being and workplace experience. This theme is divided into four subthemes: Encountering

challenges with colleagues, Challenges with navigating children's behavioural communication, Navigating others' perceptions of the TLSA role, and Financial challenges.

**Encountering challenges with colleagues**

Whilst there was mention of positive working relationships in the previous theme, other TLSAs reported the opposite, highlighting the potential disparity across participants' experiences.

Understandably, negative experiences with colleagues seemed to impact participants' overall workplace experience: *"being supported by others is a challenge. When I mention I am struggling I am often told 'we all have days like that" but no real guidance on how to improve the situation"* (P61). *"My relationship with the foundation phase teacher who is also headteacher [is] more strained, I wouldn't go to her if I needed help or support"* (P123) and *"there is no support for a difficult day…"* (P6). This suggests that support for TLSAs is variable and, as such, could be detrimental to their ability to progress or psychologically flourish.

Whereas in the previous theme, effective communication was noted as a helpful factor, other TLSAs highlighted that this was a challenge for them within their role: *"one of the main things I find exceptionally hard is the lack of communication with our class teacher[,] she has never had a class meeting with us as a team"* (P119). These quotes highlight the potential intersection between poorer working relationships, the impact that this can have on communication and, consequently, TLSAs' overall well-being.

**Challenges with navigating children's behavioural communication**

Some TLSAs reflected on how navigating children's behavioural communication challenged their perceived competence and impacted them emotionally.

*Behaviour is the biggest factor within work at present, this defines how successful I am at completing my everyday roles and responsibilities"* (P65), *"in school we have children with very challenging behaviour…watching children, colleagues and myself getting hurt on a daily basis, multiple times a day i[s] hard* (P96).

In line with supporting children's behavioural communication, participants reflected on the limits of their knowledge and skills in managing such challenges: *"behaviour is difficult to manage, and there has been no explicit training on managing behaviour. (We do have printouts explaining the levels of sanctions for certain actions)"* (P153). This particular quote reflects that TLSAs feel that they have to manage situations that they do not feel particularly well prepared for.

Another TLSA opened up about their affective feelings towards behaviour management and the limits to their competence: *"although I have undergone a lot of training, including positive behaviour management, I have had days where I've questioned what I've done wrong and beaten myself up about it"* (P66). Such reflection connects to the previous theme whereby TLSAs seemingly need to have opportunities for communication with colleagues to ensure that they feel informed, supported and able to navigate challenging situations which arise within their role.

**Navigating others' perceptions of the TLSA role**

TLSAs shared the challenges that they encountered with parents and the impact that this had on their overall identity within the school community: *"parents undervaluing [the TLSA] role…there is a general feeling that TA/LSAs are not appreciated or respected by parents"* (P166). In addition, differing priorities were reported to cause challenges for the TLSAs: *"parents can have different priorities…(the) young person loses focus or falls behind"* (P9). These examples reflect how TLSAs perceive some parents to feel about the TLSA role. It could be hypothesised that this will cause discomfort for TLSAs as they are primarily employed to support children to thrive within education but appear to feel undervalued and experience a lack of appreciation from parents.

Finally, one participant also brought attention to how the media portrays the TLSA role and noted the feelings of frustration and injustice that this led to:

> *Media portrayal of 'lazy' school staff who "get all these holidays…" has had a huge negative impact on my mental health. Job adverts that only show FTE salary that*

> *lead[s] the general public to think we are paid much more than we actually are. Being classed as unskilled for pay purposes despite all the qualifications and training we have…* (P20).

The comments just explored bring attention to some negative views perceived to be held by others which are likely to contribute to TLSAs experiencing a poor sense of appreciation and value which, in turn, is likely to impact their well-being.

**Financial challenges**

Finally, consistent with existing research documenting the challenges of the TLSA role, many participants expressed frustration about the salary of working as TLSA: *"the wage is definitely woeful and not representative of the level of my qualifications or the sheer amount of work I put in…the most glaringly obvious [challenge] would be the salary of course!"* (P24), *"I get paid more working in a supermarket than I do helping 30 children access the education they need for life"* (P30) and *"we get paid poorly for some of the most intense work in a school"* (P131). These views all mirror the known difficulties with financial remuneration within the TLSA role and the competitive salaries that may be more easily obtained in different employment.

Moreover, there were reflections about the responsibility that the role entails but the poor financial reward associated with such work: "*I feel I work extremely hard but salaries do not equate to how hard the job can often be"* (P68), *"…like my role has changed into the role of a teacher without the salary."* (P96) and *"the low payment of highly qualified TA's [sic] is unacceptable when you consider what we bring to the young people of our country for their/it's future, our pay is disgusting"* (P80).

Some participants acknowledged the difficult financial situation but shared how their enjoyment of the role continued to motivate them to stay: *"still very much enjoy my job but the pay and responsibilities do not match"* (P53) and *"for the work I do, the pay isn't very good…if I didn't love what I do, I would've chosen a different career"* (P54). This highlights the evident tenacity and passion within the TLSA workforce as they seemingly continue to

stay in the role for internal motivators. These include the positive impact that the role can have for children and young people and the sense of purpose that it offers the TLSAs themselves. This is rather than external motivators such as personal financial gain which are not as present.

### 3.4.1.5.3 The Vital Role of TLSAs: "The glue that holds a school together"

Throughout the responses, participants commented on how they support their schools with a wide range of tasks that benefit the children and staff alike. This theme is divided into three subthemes: Need for adaptability, Resource providers, and Need for clarity of the role.

**Need for adaptability**

The TLSAs reflected on how they needed to be adaptable to cover a multitude of duties: *"staff shortage[s] means we are working 2/3 people's jobs at times creating more stress."* (P13), *"I am not always ab(l)e to carry out some of my interventions because staff are sick and we have to cover f[o]r each other. This is frustrating"* (P70). Another TLSA reflected on the practicalities of an increased workload with no equal remuneration, *"as the number of LSAs has been cut, the workload and amount of class cover we do has been increased, but not our pay or hours"* (P137).

Changes to the teaching staff which TLSAs work with also reportedly led to a need for adaptability: *"I work in a class that has job share teachers. It has been difficult adapting to the different teaching styles and consistency"* (P76), *"…being in a class I do not know as well is more challenging as I am not always given direction as to where/who to support best"* (P164). These quotes demonstrate the unseen challenges that TLSAs are often required to navigate without guaranteed guidance or support.

**Resource providers**

Participants reflected on the wide range of resources (both in terms of physical and time resources) they gave to their school communities: *"Some of us go above and beyond to build relationships…tailor make interventions, miss breaktimes, stay late, come in early and*

*do many other things to assist the school and…teachers to help children learn more than just academic stuff"* (P164). Another TLSA commented on the enjoyment they experienced from supporting others *"I love sharing resources I have, it makes me happy seeing colleagues happy."* (P31). These two excerpts highlight the range of support that TLSAs share to contribute to the school community and the integral role they have within the staff team.

Whilst being a provider of resources positively contributes to the school community, it was also noted that this could come at a cost and was potentially detrimental to TLSAs' well-being: *"I'm stressed that I'm not doing enough while also being fully aware I can't give any more"* (P159).

The range of experiences reported highlights TLSAs' strong commitment to supporting their school community but also draws attention to the detrimental consequences that this can lead to concerning their emotional state and a potential infringement on their free time.

**Need for clarity of the role**

Another prevailing factor was the lack of clarity regarding the TLSA role amongst school staff and this impacted the types of tasks assigned to TLSAs: *"Making sure colleagues and senior leadership are clear about what my role is and what my role is not."* (P159), *"I feel like lots of teachers don't understand just how much work their assistants do every day"* (P159). Further, expectations within the TLSA team within the same school setting were also noted to vary greatly, *"Every TA has different roles and some have more respon[s]ibility/pressure than others even though we have the same position"* (P134). The lack of clarity and mixed experiences of TLSAs impacted on some participants' sense of identity and belonging: *"As a HLTA I am also pulled from class to cover other absences which can be tricky. It leaves me with a sense of not belonging. Part of the class but not part of the class. Not an LSA but also not a teacher"* (P76).

There were also reflections about the breadth of responsibilities that were placed upon the TLSAs, without the necessary training or ongoing support: *"I have been expected to take the class and teach when the teacher is unavailable, which is a great opportunity but feels very stressful because I am not trained nor qualified to do that."* (P108) and *"due to*

*budget cuts I'm constantly used to cover whole classes almost daily" (*P113).

The reported variation in the expectations of TLSAs reflects the unclear understanding of the parameters of the role.

### 3.4.1.5.4 Low Sense of Worth Within the School Community*: "I am generally invisible…."*

Despite the wide range of roles and invaluable support that TLSAs offer, there was a sense that TLSAs felt they were 'invisible' and treated differently to colleagues employed in different roles within the school community. This theme is divided into three subthemes: Lack of opportunities for progression and training, The weight of feeling inferior, and Poor sense of appreciation and recognition.

**Lack of opportunities for training and progression**

Across a number of the survey responses, TLSAs shared their enthusiasm for professional development along with their frustrations about the lack of opportunities for training, guidance and progression.

> *…extra resources and more training is always welcome."* (P9), *"I am constantly looking for online courses, information, seminars, tutorials, etc to improve my prospects within my role"* (P24). *"I receive no guidance, did not receive an induction, am supposed to figure everything out on my own and don't receive any line management* (P23)*.*

It was acknowledged that progression through becoming a HLTA was possible; however, this was reported to bring challenges that seemingly outweighed the perceived benefits: "*a clearer path for progression would be beneficial…I have had the opportunity to become a HLTA but as this is a role with a lot more stress and responsibility for very little extra pay…if the pay had been higher I would have done it."* (P135).

Another participant who identified that they had taken on the role of HLTA reflected on their experience: *"as a HLTA I am also pulled from class to cover other absences which can be tricky. It leaves me with a sense of not belonging"* (P76). This reflection somewhat

confirms the previous participant's concerns regarding the potential additional stress that the HLTA role could bear and brings attention to how the role could impact individuals' sense of belonging due to the nature of needing to provide cover across classes.

**The weight of feeling inferior**

TLSAs perceived a staffing hierarchy which made them feel inferior to their colleagues in other roles and also resulted in them experiencing a sense of invisibility:

*"…leadership of the LAT [Local Authority Trust] can be less respectful towards TAs and do make you feel like your importance is determined by the rank/ role you have in the school, which tends to mean TAs are bottom of the list."* (P65).

*"I am generally invisible to Senior leaders…we are not generally treated as professional colleagues by those in leadership even though we have almost the same responsibilities as teachers"* (P137).

The idea of a hierarchy may be enforced by colleagues in a range of roles as participants did not always share the position held by those who had left them encountering such negative experiences: *"it's the swinging pendulum of responsibility I find difficult - one moment your advice and experience is sought after and valued, and in the next moment you are reminded that you are 'only support staff!"* (P170).

*Within work, I feel that there is a sense of 'hierarchy' among staff, so teachers and TAs don't really mix socially. This can sometimes make me feel 'less than", or as if the teachers perceive me this way. It can be upsetting in a workplace to feel less valued than other staff members* (P7).

Finally, the experiences of a hierarchy also seemed to impact the information that TLSAs were privy to: *"…we, as [LSA]s, are not included [i]n emails about what i[s] happening in the school"* (P137) and *"I never know from one day to the next what I am doing."* (P113). These comments reflect the challenging experiences that individuals can have when there is a discrepancy between the value they perceive others to attribute to their role and the reality of the value of their contribution to the school community.

**Poor sense of appreciation and recognition**

Whilst some participants experienced positive experiences of their role, there was a relatively consistent reflection on how TLSAs generally felt underappreciated despite the high level of commitment that they perceived they offered their staff team. One participant noted: *"I enjoy my role but feel very unimportant"* (P23), illustrating a potential tension between the role they do and their perceived importance.

In addition, other participants shared that *"Being a 1:1 is stressful and underappreciated."* (P131) and *"LSAs are the glue that hold a school together. If we were…given more of a say with SLT, I think more would stay in the role."* (P30).

These experiences of feeling less important were contrasted with high expectations from SLT, yet no apparent compensation was offered. This lack of recognition seemed to reinforce the poor sense of value that TLSAs experienced: "*too much expectation from SLT that TAs will start early/stay late (outside of contracted hours) and work for nothing as no overtime allowed*" (P20).

These comments demonstrate some TLSAs perceived a poor sense of appreciation and also illustrate how participants seemed to experience low autonomy and agency over their role and subsequent deployment.

### 3.4.1.5.5 Fulfilment and Flourishing: "…[T]he children make it worthwhile"

This theme is purposefully placed in the middle of the thematic map as it seemed that experiencing a sense of fulfilment and flourishing was impacted by the other four themes and their respective subthemes. There were polarities across the responses given and, as a result, it seemed that when experiences were reported to be positive, this contributed to a positive sense of fulfilment which, in turn, appeared to contribute towards individual's positive experience of flourishing.

*"It is very rewarding to feel you have made a difference to a child."* (P3), *"…I know I make a big difference to children who need support and understanding to thrive within a school environment."* (P79).

A sense of pride, commitment and honour were also apparent: "*I feel honoured to*

*support my young person and see them improve"* (P9), *"the positive is the pupils - seeing the progress they make due to the support I give"* (P20) and *"I've helped some amazing children and hopefully helped them enjoy school and helped build confidence in themselves"* (P98).

Some participants referred to the dichotomy of challenge and reward relating to the role: "*I love my job, I love the challenges, the successes no matter how big or small"* (P110) and *"I enjoy my job greatly and look forward to work most days. Some days are harder than others but the children make it worthwhile"* (P61).

TLSAs also indirectly referred to their own approaches and outlook which suggested resilience, motivation and competence: *"I'm happy because I can handle any task that has been given to me"* (P78) and "*I feel challenged at work but in a way in which I can be successful."* (P61)*.*

All of these aforementioned quotes within this subtheme reflect the admirable dedication that TLSAs show within their role, especially given the challenging circumstances they are currently navigating.

### *3.4.2 Study 2*

#### 3.4.2.1 Quantitative analysis – Peer Support Groups

Three participants reported that their current school was the only setting where they had been employed as a TLSA and two participants shared that they had experience working as a TLSA elsewhere before joining their current setting. Descriptively, the mean scores for the five participants on the Workplace PERMA Profiler, prior to engaging with the peer support programme (Table 11), were broadly comparable to the scores obtained from the national sample as both sets of scores fell into the 'normal functioning' classification (Kern, 2025).

**Table 11**

*Means, Standard Deviations and Cronbach's Alpha for the Workplace PERMA Profiler for the Peer Support Groups pre-programme*

| Subscale | *M* | *SD* | α |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive Emotion (P) | 6.33 | 1.55 | .90 |
| Engagement (E) | 6.93 | 1.32 | .62 |
| Relationships (R) | 7.40 | 2.06 | .91 |
| Meaning (M) | 7.27 | 1.69 | .94 |
| Accomplishment (A) | 6.40 | 1.16 | .76 |
| Overall Well-being score | 6.88 | 1.46 | .85 |
| Health | 6.33 | 2.22 | .97 |
| Negative Emotion | 3.07 | 1.88 | .62 |

Post-programme, descriptively, the individual PERMA pillar scores showed a slight increase at the end of the six-month peer support programme, suggesting positive outcomes (Table 12). Changes in terms of classifications occurred for the pillars of Positive Emotion and Accomplishment, both of which increased from 'sub-optimal' to 'normal functioning' and Meaning which changed from 'normal' to 'high functioning' post-programme. An increase was also reported for the pillar of Negative Emotion however, it was expected that this particular score would have decreased post-programme as it was reverse scored. Notably, the change in score was not great enough to change the classification and it remained in the category of 'normal functioning'. Given the small number of participants (*n* = 5), it was not deemed appropriate to carry out a statistical analysis of the results as the numbers would not have yielded enough power.

**Table 12**

*Means, Standard Deviations and Cronbach's Alpha for the Workplace PERMA Profiler for the Peer Support Groups Post-Programme*

| Subscale | *M* | *SD* | α |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive Emotion (P) | 6.78 | 1.44 | .74 |
| Engagement (E) | 7.61 | 1.00 | .46 |
| Relationships (R) | 7.94 | 1.73 | .80 |
| Meaning (M) | 8.00 | 1.13 | .94 |
| Accomplishment (A) | 7.40 | 0.95 | .73 |
| Overall Well-being score | 7.58 | 1.12 | .85 |
| Health | 6.13 | 1.89 | .92 |
| Negative Emotion | 3.56 | 2.17 | .50 |

## Qualitative Results – Part Three

### 3.4.2.2 Qualitative analysis for the Peer Support Groups - Content Analysis

In the national survey (Study 1), participants were additionally asked about changes that they hoped to see in the TLSA role. These initial responses were coded using RTA. The codes formed from this analysis were grouped into two themes: *Time to connect with colleagues* and *Desire for knowledge and skill growth*. These two themes were not included in the write-up of the national survey findings as they related to participants' hopes rather than their current experiences within the TLSA role. Instead of being included in Part One of the qualitative write-up, the themes and codes forming such themes were used as a codebook for the analysis of the third research question: *What are the lived experiences of TLSAs engaging in a peer support group?*

To answer this third research question, a content analysis approach was adopted to assess whether participating in peer support groups offered support which aligned with some of the hopes that participants had shared in the national survey. A manifest content analysis approach (Bengtsson, 2016) was adopted for this part of the research as it focussed on

deriving content from responses without interpretation of underlying meaning (Bengtsson, 2016). Given that the peer support groups were facilitated to explore their suitability as a way of supporting TLSA well-being, it was thought appropriate to connect the qualitative findings from the post-peer support groups questionnaire with the national survey data, as this gathered the hopes of a larger participant pool ($n$ = 178). This approach to analysis allowed for a more integrated understanding of how the hopes of the larger participant group aligned with the lived experiences of the participants who engaged with peer support groups. The four-stage approach to manifest content analysis as, outlined by Bengtsson (2016), was followed for this process of analysis.

The findings from this analysis are presented below (*for transparency, the quotes from the national survey participants are denoted with 'NS' and the peer support groups are marked as 'PSG'*):

### 3.4.2.2.1 Time to Connect with Colleagues

Within the national survey data, participants commented on how they hoped for *"more contact-time to discuss practice with fellow colleagues"* (P15$_{NS}$), *"to be listened to, to have TA meetings that allow us to vent our feelings and those being acted upon rather than swept under the carpet."* (P80$_{NS}$) and *"an opportunity for more time to talk with adults in the same role as me within school"* (P79$_{NS}$).

From the peer support group feedback, it seemed that the pilot programme contributed to offering such hoped-for support. Participants from the PSGs shared that they appreciated having time to talk with colleagues: *"(it was) a positive experience, that is needed in a busy work environment as we don't often get time just to reflect and talk things through"* (P1$_{PSG}$) and *"it was nice to feel like I wasn't alone in feeling overwhelmed with the work"* (P4$_{PSG}$).

The groups also seemed to offer participants opportunities to develop their understanding and appreciation of one another: *"I think we have begun to understand each other more as we have shared feelings and situations that otherwise we wouldn't have had*

*time to discuss…having time to chat and check in with each other makes you appreciate each other more…"* (P1₍PSG₎), *"I feel that the relationships have been strengthened, personally and professionally. Having an awareness of the things happening in people's lives makes it easier to support them and check in throughout the week"* (P3₍PSG₎).

One participant also noted the reciprocity of support that the groups seemed to offer: *"I really enjoyed getting time to know the others in my group better and listening to their struggles but also receiving their advice and support…it was a great opportunity to connect with others in the team, to feel supported and to offer support"* (P3₍PSG₎).

Participants reflected on how the groups supported their sense of belonging: "*I think that the group also fostered a sense of belonging."* (P3₍PSG₎). In addition, the groups also seemed to support TLSAs to develop a stronger sense of community amongst themselves, *"knowing that I am not alone feeling the way I do and majority of my colleagues are happy to help"* (P4₍PSG₎) and *"…I know there are other people I can call on to help in tricky situations"* (P5₍PSG₎). An individual also noted that they hoped that the connections formed through the groups would continue to strengthen, "*I have really enjoyed the time and* space *to reflect and connect with others in my team, moving forward I hope these working relationships continue to grow*" (P3₍PSG₎).

### 3.4.2.2.2 Desire for Advancing Knowledge, Skills and Resources

Across a number of the national survey responses, participants referred to a hope to access training, resources and general continuing professional development (CPD) to support them within their role: *"…extra resources and more training is always welcome."* (P9₍NS₎), *"I am constantly looking for online courses, information, seminars, tutorials, etc to improve my prospects within my role"* (P24₍NS₎).

Within the peer support groups, participants were invited to discuss challenges that they were encountering in their role and this was reported to help support attendees to form plans for moving forward as well as easing their workload: "*I've brought a problem to the group and…we made a plan for moving forwards, this was valuable for my day to day tasks*

*and took some pressure off so made it easier…"* (P3$_{PSG}$). Others highlighted that sharing resources was helpful for them *"I have been able to use resources shared and approach situations using ideas that my co-workers have used...I think it has been valuable to have time to be able to share and explore ideas"* (P2$_{PSG}$).

Whilst the sessions appeared to offer the participants an opportunity to problem solve and resource-share, one participant noted that they would have liked more structure within the sessions, *"I would have liked a little more structure sometimes e.g., a topic to discuss or a particular issue to resolve"* (P3$_{PSG}$). This reflection is helpful as it highlights the centrality of TLSAs bringing items to discuss to the groups. The researcher considered planning a series of topics to explore over the course of the pilot and discussed this initial idea with members of the peer support groups. There were mixed views about this and, therefore, in line with the general principles of facilitating peer support groups, it was decided that participants would be empowered to take ownership and bring topics which were felt to be important for discussion during the groups to ensure that the groups were relevant and as helpful as possible.

## 3.5 Discussion

This research aimed to ascertain the current state of TLSAs' well-being within the UK and determine what is currently supporting their well-being through the adoption of a positive psychology approach (Seligman, 2011). This aim was achieved via a mixed-method approach. A national online survey was completed by 178 TLSAs working in primary schools across the UK which involved participants completing the Workplace PERMA Profiler. This measure offered them an opportunity to rate their current well-being in the workplace and respond to open-ended questions about their lived experiences as TLSAs. Furthermore, this research aimed to explore the impact of peer support groups for TLSAs, in line with recommendations made by Ravalier et al., (2021), whose earlier study had identified that future research could explore the efficacy of an intervention to support working conditions for TLSAs.

Given that this research is comprised of two studies, the discussion is broken into the respective elements: Study 1: The National Survey, and Study 2: Peer Support Groups. Finally, the limitations and implications for practice of both parts of this research are jointly discussed.

### 3.5.1 Study 1 - National Survey

Responses to the national survey offered detailed insight into the varied responsibilities that TLSAs held as part of their role (i.e., ELSA, speech and language support and first aid responsibilities) and brought attention to the variation in the duration of breaks that TLSAs are afforded and/or utilise. This study also identified that some TLSAs held dual employment, working full-time as a TLSA and part-time in another job.

According to classification guidance shared by Kern (2025), the results from the Workplace PERMA Profiler note that TLSAs who partook in the national survey are within the 'normal functioning' range for well-being ($M$ = 6.92), ($SD$ = 1.69). Notably, within this national survey dataset, the scores on the Relationships sub-scale had the highest variation ($SD$ = 2.15); this could be attributable to the differences in the relationship quality that participants perceived they had. This potential assertion is supported by the qualitative responses that participants gave, as many reflected on their experiences with colleagues, with some highlighting positive connections and others finding such relationships challenging. In addition to Relationships, the Health pillar had the second highest variation of the PERMA domains ($SD$ = 2.31). This variability may reflect diverse health needs within the participant pool which may not necessarily be attributable to the workplace (i.e. a physical health condition is unlikely to be the result of their job role, however, their job role could influence how they manage and feel about their state of health - particularly if job-related demands exacerbate their condition). Nevertheless, regardless of the cause of health challenges, variations in one's health are likely to impact individuals' perceptions of well-being at work and research has identified that individuals who have good emotional, physical and mental health are more likely to experience higher levels of job satisfaction (Adams, 2019). This

supports the hypothesis that health is likely to influence workplace well-being.

Through the qualitative part of the survey, participants took the time to reflect on the factors which were perceived to support them as well as what negatively impacted them. Within a number of the participants' responses, it was identified that the connection that the TLSA had with their colleagues (including the class teacher) impacted their experiences at work and seemingly influenced their sense of belonging. This is similar to what has been identified in previous qualitative research involving 15 TLSAs by Sirkko et al. (2022). Within their research, it was identified that open interactions and feeling like a valued member of the school team were imperative for positive experiences of belonging. This current research identified similar narratives through RTA within the theme of Low Sense of Worth Within the School Community.

In line with Kern's (2025) guidance, it was helpful to pair qualitative questions with the Workplace PERMA Profiler as it enabled a more nuanced understanding of the current well-being of TLSAs employed within UK primary schools to be understood. From the initial interpretation and analysis, it seemed that there was a disparity between the qualitative and quantitative findings as, within the quantitative results, the TLSAs' well-being could be categorised in the 'normal' functioning range (Kern, 2025). However, the interpretations made by the researcher about the participants' qualitative responses brought attention to a range of challenges which could be said to be unexpected within a population who are noted to have 'normal functioning' well-being. A potential explanation for this disparity could be that the Workplace PERMA Profiler requires participants to rate their response on an 11-point Likert scale and such a self-report measure could have been vulnerable to error. Prior research has identified that quantitative data collection measures can be prone to error as they are subjective and can be influenced by a multitude of factors, including the order in which the questions are presented (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2001). In addition, such errors can occur as not all individuals will necessarily conceptualise what constitutes a certain score in the same way. Bishop and Herron (2015) highlighted that statistics from quantitative measures should be used to guide and enable researchers to consider the data gathered about the

population in question in a somewhat tentative sense and not used as an absolute; this assertion also mirrors Kern's (2025) online guidance. Whilst the Workplace PERMA Profiler provided opportunities for participants to indicate via a numerical score their chosen response to the written statements posed within the measure, this did not allow them to give an accompanying qualitative response. These additional details may have been imperative for understanding the rationale behind the chosen score. Importantly, Kern (2025) highlights that the numerical scoring approach should not be used in a diagnostic way and acknowledges that well-being is a fluid concept which does not lend itself to a static score.

It is important to note that the Workplace PERMA Profiler measures certain elements of well-being (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment, Health and Negative Emotion). Lived experiences are more nuanced than the seven domains captured within the PERMA frameworks and, invariably, a quantitative measure is unlikely to allow for justification of certain responses. Whereas, in comparison, qualitative methods allow for a more nuanced exploration of the topic in focus (Palinkas, 2014). Therefore, attention must be given to both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the research as both offer different information which can contribute to the wider understanding of TLSA well-being.

Self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) may help to explain the discrepancy identified between the quantitative and qualitative findings. The SDT suggests that three areas need to be satisfied for one to experience optimal well-being: competence, relatedness and autonomy. It could be hypothesised that the questions asked in the quantitative part of this research offered more opportunities for these three areas to be considered and evaluated by participants (as these quantitative questions focussed on internal affective experiences such as '*At work, how often do you feel positive?*' and '*To what extent do you feel that what you do at work is valuable and worthwhile?*'. Whereas, in comparison, the qualitative elements were more focussed on considering external factors which may have influenced their well-being, including '*What steps, if any, has your workplace taken to support your well-being?...*' and '*What steps, both in and outside of work, have you*

*taken to support your own well-being?...'*). The difference in prompting participants to think about internal affective factors or external factors may account for the differences noted, as it could be hypothesised that participants feel greater control and autonomy over internal affective factors and, subsequently, this led to more positive quantitative appraisals to the statements presented in the Workplace PERMA Profiler. In comparison, the qualitative elements were more concerned with external factors and participants may have felt they had less influence over these which may have led to them identifying more challenges within these areas. If this assertion is true and the quantitative and qualitative aspects of this research did assess different dimensions of well-being, it could be hypothesised that participants' differing interpretations of autonomy, competence and relatedness, in relation to intrinsic versus extrinsic aspects of their job role, may account for the disparity between the two sets of findings.

In addition, there is a possibility that the qualitative findings were also vulnerable to bias as Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and Deductive Manifest Content analysis were used to analyse the qualitative aspects of this research. The researcher's own experiences could have influenced how they interpreted the data and then formed subsequent themes and subthemes. To reduce the likelihood of bias occurring, they engaged with regular supervision with multiple supervisors (notably one of whom did not work within the statutory education sector and was less likely to be biased by their working life experiences in this sector), to ensure that their interpretations were well-considered and formulated and were conscious of the process and influence of reflexivity throughout the analysis.

### 3.5.2. Study 2 - The Peer Support Groups

Previous research has identified that peer support can buffer the negative impact of high stress and low control within job roles (Karasek & Theroell, 1990). Therefore, in line with previous research findings and recommendations, peer support groups were piloted in two UK primary schools and evaluated for both process (i.e., how they worked) and impact. Five

of the initial seven participants completed the peer support groups and provided qualitative feedback and pre-post ratings on the Workplace PERMA Profiler. To date, research has utilised the Workplace PERMA Profiler to consider the relationship between job strain, work engagement and explored the association of workplace well-being and fatigue (Yang et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2024). However, the use of the profiler as a pre- and post-measure for assessing the potential impact of an intervention or programme is seemingly more limited. Therefore, this current research appears to be the first of its kind to assess the impact of a programme both pre- and post-intervention programme using the Workplace PERMA Profiler.

Within the pre-programme data for the peer support groups, the Workplace PERMA Profiler results were comparable to those gathered through the national survey. The Overall Well-being score for this group was also of 'normal functioning' pre-programme ($M$ = 6.88, $SD$ = 1.46) and, interestingly, both Relationships ($SD$ = 2.06) and Health ($SD$ = 2.22) had the greatest variance, again, mirroring the national survey dataset. Post-programme, Overall Well-being scores increased and remained within the 'normal functioning' range ($M$ = 7.58, $SD$ = 1.12). However, due to the small number of participants ($n$ = 5) these findings were not tested for statistical significance.

The Workplace PERMA Profiler scores increased across all five core areas of PERMA and the additional factor of Health after engaging in the programme. For the Relationships pillar, participants within the peer support groups had a higher pre- ($M$ = 7.40) and post-score ($M$ = 7.94) than the national survey respondents ($M$ = 6.77). Potential reasons for this may be that participants in the peer support groups could have felt a greater connectedness to their colleagues as they were participating in a group programme. Whereas participants in the national survey were more likely to be completing the survey in isolation and this environmental difference may have influenced the affective feelings that they experienced at the time of completing the data collection measures. In addition, within the peer support group data, both the Positive Emotion and Meaning pillars increased enough post-programme to change their categorisation of functioning (Kern, 2025). It is important to acknowledge that participants' scores were also raised on the Negative Emotion aspect of

the survey post-programme and an elevation in this aspect of the measure was less desirable.

A number of interpretations for why the observed quantitative changes may have occurred in the peer support group dataset are possible. First, with respect to the change in the core PERMA pillars and Health, the increase in scores may suggest that the peer support groups had a positive impact on the participants' well-being. Secondly, similar to the national survey, given that the survey was a self-report measure, it could be that participants' affective state on the day impacted their responses. It is also possible that participants were inadvertently asked to complete the post-programme questionnaire at a high stress time. In one of the schools that hosted the peer support groups, the team were short-staffed at the time of the post-programme data collection. This meant that they covered one another in class when completing the measures. This could be hypothesised to have increased their perceptions of negative emotion. This hypothesis is supported by research which has identified that manipulating participants' mood can lead to differences in self-report measures specifically when questions relate to 'job overload', 'satisfaction with personal development' and 'social support experienced from co-workers' (Askim & Knardahl, 2021). Notably, all of these elements are included within the Workplace PERMA Profiler measure and were potentially vulnerable to error due to participants' understandable affective state.

This current research evaluates the effectiveness of peer support groups without a control group. It is possible that the mere fact that the group met regularly to connect contributed to enhancing perceptions of well-being and that the specific structure or content of the meetings were not responsible for the improved scores observed. That said, if 'connecting' is attributable to the positive outcomes, this is an important finding as it highlights the potential benefits of school settings aiming to ensure that such opportunities are facilitated within the school community. Through the lens of the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) (which suggests that an imbalance between job-related demands and job resources can lead to decreased motivation and burnout), it would be said that connecting

with colleagues is a form of resource which supports individuals' motivational process, positively impacts their workplace well-being and thus should be encouraged.

### 3.5.3 Considering the National Survey and Peer Support Groups together

Taking the quantitative and qualitative results together, whilst both the national survey and peer support group data from the Workplace PERMA Profiler allude that TLSAs have 'normal functioning' well-being, Kern (2025) acknowledges that numerical categories are difficult to define for this subjective and fluid construct. In addition, it is noted that categorising well-being may lead to people striving to achieve 'better' (Kern, 2025) and this may hinder well-being as this invisible, yet impacting, pressure to achieve more may lead to unauthentically inflated well-being. Therefore, whilst considering the mean scores obtained as a potentially helpful indicator of overall well-being, these scores need to be considered alongside the qualitative responses which offer richer detail about the participants' lived experiences.

Through the use of the manifest content analysis approach (Bengtsson, 2016), it was evident that participants experienced benefits which aligned with the hopes expressed by participants in the national survey. Across the quantitative and qualitative findings from both the national survey and the peer support groups, it was evident that TLSAs were calling for more opportunities to connect with colleagues, develop their knowledge and skills and experience a genuine sense of appreciation from co-workers and wider society. It is, therefore, hoped that bringing attention to the potential usefulness of peer support groups, similar to positive findings identified in the wider literature such as offering emotional support (France & Billington, 2020), supporting working relationships (Osborne & Burton, 2014), and improving attendees' sense of agency and feelings of empowerment (Gardner et al., 2022), will help to inform future practice which is supportive of TLSAs' well-being.

### 3.5.4 Limitations of this research

There are limitations to this research. As of 2023, there were approximately 195,201 full-time TLSAs employed within primary schools in the UK (Department for Education, 2023)

127

and Study 1 of this current research only gained responses from approximately 0.09% of the entire UK TLSA workforce ($n$ = 178), which means that many views were not represented. However, as an initial scoping survey, this research adds to the evidence base given the current scarcity of research within this field. In addition, it needs to be acknowledged that participants who responded to the national survey may have perceived that they had the time, inclination or cognitive energy to do so. In comparison, TLSAs who did not partake may have had poorer well-being due to less of the aforementioned resources (e.g., time) or, conversely, they may not have felt a need to participate as they felt that their well-being was positive. As a result, this research may not have been a priority for some TLSAs due to the perceived lack of personal relevance and this highlights the problem of self-selection bias (Heckman, 1979). Therefore, the results identified and presented within this body of research need to be carefully considered as they only represent the experiences of a small percentage of the overall UK TLSA workforce.

Another one of the limitations of this research is the small number of participants who were involved in the peer support groups. It was hoped that more TLSAs would be able to take part; however, despite reaching out to a number of schools, the researcher only obtained the commitment from two UK primary schools. This meant that the number of TLSAs who took part did not comprise a large enough sample to test for statistical significance. Therefore, the conclusions drawn for such elements of the research are tentative and, despite the best hopes of this research, unfortunately, there is still scarce evidence for the statistical evidence of using the Workplace PERMA Profiler for evaluation purposes pre- and post-programme.

Future research could aim to gather a broader range of perspectives and experiences of TLSAs through similar quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Such views should be sought from TLSAs working in a range of education sectors beyond the exclusivity of primary schools. In addition, such endeavours may involve further facilitation of peer support groups to add research evidence to the knowledge base, which will enable additional understanding about the effectiveness of such support. These groups may benefit from

following a similar structure to that of those facilitated within this research; this will need to involve regular meetings, protected time to meet and ensuring that TLSAs are invited rather than expected to attend. To enable more TLSAs to be offered such an opportunity, awareness of this approach for TLSA support will need to increase across professions such as educational psychology, as these professionals are well placed to facilitate the groups,

Furthermore, alongside administration of the Workplace PERMA Profiler, future research design could incorporate qualitative questions which align more closely with the quantitative measure chosen, to enable a better understanding of specific elements of well-being to be understood. Within this research, it is hypothesised that the quantitative questions may have sought to investigate factors relating to internal affective experiences, whereas the qualitative questions asked participants about their experience with external factors (such as the impact of resources and others' actions). As a result, the information gained from both the qualitative and quantitative streams of data collection could be said to have breadth rather than depth of understanding.

The questions involved in future research could ask participants to self-report their views about their well-being using the pre-defined categories by Kern (2025) as this would enable comparison of participants' self-reported classification and results obtained through the Workplace PERMA Profiler. Having both participants' self-reported classification of well-being 'functioning' and the numerical result would provide insight into the agreement or discrepancy between participants' perspectives and the Workplace PERMA profiler guidance.

### 3.5.5 Implications for practice

This research has brought attention to the current experiences that TLSAs report within their role in UK primary schools and has also offered insight into the multiple roles and responsibilities that TLSAs hold. This has important implications as, currently, within the UK, teachers have protected time of at least ten per cent of their timetabled teaching time for planning of lessons, preparing materials and assessment, as documented in the School

Teachers' Pay and Conditions document (STPCd) (Department for Education, 2024). Similar to what has been identified in other research by Webster (2024), this current research found that TLSAs reported taking on the responsibility for covering and/or teaching whole classes. Within the role of a TLSA, individuals are not protected by the STPCd. This is concerning as, within this current research and the literature previously discussed, it is apparent that some TLSAs are expected to cover classes without the same statutory framework that teachers have to ensure that they have availability of resources (i.e. protected time) to enable them to prepare. Instead, TLSAS may not be afforded such opportunities and, consequently, are having to plan in the moment, which could lead to sub-optimal teaching experiences for children. In addition, this will add additional pressure onto TLSAs and may hinder their well-being.

The range of themes that were identified using RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021) could be used as a framework by SLTs to reflect on their current school context and practice (i.e. consideration of whether there are regular opportunities for connection and whether TLSAs are regularly informed about important information which may be imperative for their role). Where possible, the views of TLSAs should be held central to such consideration and planning about changes as they will undoubtedly have useful knowledge and insights into the practicalities of potential initiatives and support. In addition, in line with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), if TLSAs are involved they are more likely to experience relatedness to those around them, and to feel a sense of competence as they are included within the planning. Finally, having the opportunity to share views and feel a sense of ownership over their ideas is likely to support feelings of autonomy which will positively contribute to their well-being. Changes to support TLSAs' well-being may not require a wealth of resources as, highlighted within this research's findings, some TLSAs from the national survey noted that experiencing small acts of kindness (e.g., "*simply saying thank you*") may have a positive impact on their sense of worth and, subsequently, their well-being.

In addition, the preliminary findings from the peer support groups pinpoint the potential usefulness of offering such support for individuals within the TLSA role. It seems imperative

that these groups are routinely facilitated in collaboration with professionals, such as educational psychologists, as individuals external to the school can facilitate an unbiased and non-judgmental space for staff to reflect in. In doing so, TLSAs will have the opportunity to reflect, connect and develop skills with colleagues which will support their practice. In turn, such investment in TLSAs' well-being is likely to yield better outcomes for the children and young people that they support and wider school communities. This is because nurturing TLSAs' well-being is likely to enable them to have greater capacity and sense of preparedness to then support others within the various school communities that they are an integral part of.

### 3.5.6 Conclusions

This research has contributed new knowledge about TLSAs' current circumstances and well-being. It identified factors that, from the perspective of the TLSAs, support their flourishing and sense of fulfilment, as well as those that undermine their well-being. This research also involved the facilitation of peer support groups with TLSAs; an approach which, to date, has not been documented in the literature. Whilst the research was based on a small participant pool, the results gathered from the participants suggest that the peer support groups brought about positive experiences and somewhat meaningful change for their well-being.

Further research is needed to explore the lived experiences of TLSAs, particularly across different educational phases. The current study focused solely on primary-school staff and had somewhat low participation when compared to the number of individuals working in TLSA roles. Given Ravalier et al.'s (2021) findings that TLSAs working in different educational phases face distinct experiences, future research should first aim to build a robust evidence base specific to each setting and phase. As this body of research grows, a synthesis could then be conducted to identify commonalities and differences across the diverse contexts in which TLSAs work. Additionally, further research into the facilitation of peer support groups for TLSAs across all phases of schooling would help to build

understanding of the potential value of such interventions for staff well-being.

Taken together, the current findings in combination with further research in this area have the potential to contribute to the development of more informed provision to support TLSAs; these individuals contribute significantly to schools, offering their time, skills and knowledge, to support children, young people and school colleagues often for comparatively low financial compensation and acknowledgement.

**Appendix A Excerpt of my reflective log about reflexivity**

June 2024.

Whilst supporting the TLSA group I am trying to ensure that I hold in mind how my experience w a former TA may influence how I interpret and understand the TLSA experiences. I am mindful that I worked in a range of schools through a supply staff agency and, therefore was priviledged to immerse myself in a range of school environments. I feel these experiences are enabling me to genuinely connect and empathise with the TLSAs who are attending the peer support groups. That being said, I am also trying to hold in mind that their experience and appraising such events may differ to mine and I, therefore need to hold my experiences in mind but about project my previous experiences onto them.

**Appendix A Excerpt from my reflective diary about bots**

April 2024.

I was so pleased to have gained over 200 responses in a very short period of time. I thought it would mean that I'd end up with a very large participant pool however after starting to look at the individual datasets I saw similarities in the wording of the responses as well as identical IP addresses.

This is going to cause a big problem in the short term. Things I need to consider

→ IP addresses could be the same eg. Same School.

→ Need ethics amendment to be able to pair IP and responses.

→ check postcode data provided

→ check length of time taken.

→ Insert Captcha to Survey screen.

**Appendix C The resource to share with school staff**

This resource has been created having been influenced by the themes identified through the process of Reflexive Thematic Analysis for the National Survey data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The resource can be shared with TLSAs, EPs and SLTs (amongst other professionals who work alongside and support TLSAs). It is hoped that it can be used as a framework to support the facilitation of reflective conversations which offer opportunities for TLSAs (and where appropriate and possible, other members of staff working in the education sector) to reflect on the current context (both locally and nationally) and consider how these factors and associated experiences can influence well-being. It is hoped that this could form part of an appraisal or performance management process and could be used as a framework which encourages compassion and consideration for everyone's well-being during staff meetings. Notably, it is not a substitute for supervision sessions but rather a resource which can hopefully be utilised in a range of ways to encourage conversations that adopt a lens of compassion and care towards well-being.

## Flower of Fulfilment and Flourishing

**Current challenges**

**Opportunities**

**Key connections**

**Fulfilment**

**Flourishing**

**My role and contribution**

**Hopes**

Flowers represent growth and resilience. Like us, they need positive experiences to support them to flourish and 'weather' the challenging circumstances that can occur in life. Enduring and overcoming challenges (like storms) helps us to develop strength and values that we need to be able to bounce back.
*Every flower is unique, just like us.*

You may like to use this image for personal reflection or as a framework for conversation. Alternatively, you may feel inspired to draw a flower with multiple petals and, if helpful, raindrops to reflect the challenges. On your drawing, you could note the factors which you perceive are contributing to your current lived experience.

It is important to acknowledge that there may be barriers that make your role more challenging. It is often key to notice and name these to enable positive and potential ways forward to be identified, where possible.

**Questions that you may like to consider:**

*At work:*
- who can you turn to when dealing with uncomfortable feelings and/or experiences?
- what would you most like to keep the same or change in your role?
- what skills and/or qualities can you offer to support the community around you?
- what opportunities have been available to you? What helps or hinders your ability to seize these opportunities?

# Appendix D Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative (ENTREQ) research (Tong et al., 2012)

**Table 1 Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research: the ENTREQ statement**

| No | Item | Guide and description |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Aim | State the research question the synthesis addresses. |
| 2 | Synthesis methodology | Identify the synthesis methodology or theoretical framework which underpins the synthesis, and describe the rationale for choice of methodology (*e.g. meta-ethnography, thematic synthesis, critical interpretive synthesis, grounded theory synthesis, realist synthesis, meta-aggregation, meta-study, framework synthesis*). |
| 3 | Approach to searching | Indicate whether the search was pre-planned (*comprehensive search strategies to seek all available studies*) or iterative (*to seek all available concepts until they theoretical saturation is achieved*). |
| 4 | Inclusion criteria | Specify the inclusion/exclusion criteria (*e.g. in terms of population, language, year limits, type of publication, study type*). |
| 5 | Data sources | Describe the information sources used (*e.g. electronic databases (MEDLINE, EMBASE, CINAHL, psycINFO, Econlit), grey literature databases (digital thesis, policy reports), relevant organisational websites, experts, information specialists, generic web searches (Google Scholar) hand searching, reference lists*) and when the searches conducted; provide the rationale for using the data sources. |
| 6 | Electronic Search strategy | Describe the literature search (*e.g. provide electronic search strategies with population terms, clinical or health topic terms, experiential or social phenomena related terms, filters for qualitative research, and search limits*). |
| 7 | Study screening methods | Describe the process of study screening and sifting (*e.g. title, abstract and full text review, number of independent reviewers who screened studies*). |
| 8 | Study characteristics | Present the characteristics of the included studies (*e.g. year of publication, country, population, number of participants, data collection, methodology, analysis, research questions*). |
| 9 | Study selection results | Identify the number of studies screened and provide reasons for study exclusion (*e,g, for comprehensive searching, provide numbers of studies screened and reasons for exclusion indicated in a figure/flowchart; for iterative searching describe reasons for study exclusion and inclusion based on modifications t the research question and/or contribution to theory development*). |
| 10 | Rationale for appraisal | Describe the rationale and approach used to appraise the included studies or selected findings (*e.g. assessment of conduct (validity and robustness), assessment of reporting (transparency), assessment of content and utility of the findings*). |
| 11 | Appraisal items | State the tools, frameworks and criteria used to appraise the studies or selected findings (*e.g. Existing tools: CASP, QARI, COREQ, Mays and Pope [25]; reviewer developed tools; describe the domains assessed: research team, study design, data analysis and interpretations, reporting*). |
| 12 | Appraisal process | Indicate whether the appraisal was conducted independently by more than one reviewer and if consensus was required. |
| 13 | Appraisal results | Present results of the quality assessment and indicate which articles, if any, were weighted/excluded based on the assessment and give the rationale. |
| 14 | Data extraction | Indicate which sections of the primary studies were analysed and how were the data extracted from the primary studies? (*e.g. all text under the headings "results /conclusions" were extracted electronically and entered into a computer software*). |
| 15 | Software | State the computer software used, if any. |
| 16 | Number of reviewers | Identify who was involved in coding and analysis. |
| 17 | Coding | Describe the process for coding of data (*e.g. line by line coding to search for concepts*). |
| 18 | Study comparison | Describe how were comparisons made within and across studies (*e.g. subsequent studies were coded into pre-existing concepts, and new concepts were created when deemed necessary*). |
| 19 | Derivation of themes | Explain whether the process of deriving the themes or constructs was inductive or deductive. |
| 20 | Quotations | Provide quotations from the primary studies to illustrate themes/constructs, and identify whether the quotations were participant quotations of the author's interpretation. |
| 21 | Synthesis output | Present rich, compelling and useful results that go beyond a summary of the primary studies (*e.g. new interpretation, models of evidence, conceptual models, analytical framework, development of a new theory or construct*). |

**Appendix E The CASP qualitative appraisal**

| Name of article | Question 1<br><br>Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research? | Question 2<br><br>Is a qualitative methodology appropriate? | Question 3<br><br>Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research? | Question 4<br><br>Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research? | Question 5<br><br>Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue? | Question 6<br><br>Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered? | Question 7<br><br>Have ethical issues been taken into consideration? | Question 8<br><br>Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous? | Question 9<br><br>Is there a clear statement of findings? | Question 10<br><br>How valuable is the research? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Stories of Surveillance and Resistance: Young People with Dwarfism and Teaching Assistants in Secondary Schools in the United Kingdom<br><br>Ktenidis (2023) | The paper 'aims to illustrate how support both re-inscribes cultural beliefs about disability as a problem to be 'managed' and/or 'fixed' and institutional power over disabled young people'. | Yes, interviews are conducted and offered in different ways to suit participants (e.g., interviews in person or online, 1:1, 1:2 etc.) | The researcher gathered views of YP in school and those who have progressed on from education. They used qualitative methods and held a clear framework in mind throughout. However, the teenage participants were required to have a chaperone (their mothers) present during the interview and this may have impacted the data collected. | Yes. The researchers utilised a range of platforms to reach participants including an annual conference for those who are diagnosed with Dwarfism as well as those supporting this community. | Yes, qualitative interviews were carried out and transcribed verbatim. | It is unknown to what extent the researcher reflected on their own experiences when conducting the data collection and analysing the transcripts | Yes, the researcher wrote about obtaining parental consent and the teenage participants were always accompanied by their mother. The researcher also highlighted that they asked the teenagers for consent and highlighted that it was their choice if they wished to partake. | Yes, the researchers shared how they analysed the data and highlighted that the findings went beyond the framework they were holding in mind. There are helpful quotes throughout the results section to illustrate the conclusions made by the researchers. | Yes, there is a clear conclusions section which outlines the main findings and implications for this piece of research. | It adds a new angle in which to consider the impact of TA support specifically for those in the Dwarfism community. |

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| The perspectives and experiences of children with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools regarding their individual teaching assistant support<br><br>(Pinkard, 2021) | The aims were to explore the question: what are the perspectives and experiences of pupils with SEN in mainstream primary schools regarding their individual TA support? | Yes as it gathered the views of pupils. Qualitative methods allow for deeper exploration of participants experiences in comparison to a quantitative measure. This approach also enabled the researcher to explore the children's initial answers further. Also, the semi-structured interview length varied on the individual child (demonstrating a person-centred and tailored approach). | Yes. It was a small-scale research project which aimed to gather detailed views from children about their lived experiences of TA support. | Yes opportunity sampling was used. The researcher contacted school SENCos to invite children who were in Year 6 and with a EHCP (or equivalent). | Yes. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. This enabled exploration and interpretation from the researcher about the children's experiences. | It was identified that SENCos in 'local schools' were contacted but the extent to which the researcher knew them (e.g., were they familiar or unfamiliar schools to the researcher) was not acknowledged. | The research states that ethical approval was granted by the university that the author was training at. However, there was no explicit mention of gaining parent/carer consent or assent from the children (participants) prior to the interviews. | The process used is clearly stated and the researcher has shared how the analysis was conducted using NVivo. Thematic maps are clearly shared in the body of the paper. | The findings are clearly summarised in the conclusion. | Useful for helping to build the evidence base for the argument that children need to have an active voice in research and decision making which affects them. |

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| Understanding the role of the Teaching Assistant: Comparing the views of pupils with SEN and TAs within mainstream primary schools<br><br>Wren (2017) | To extend understanding of how children and TAs perceive the TA role. With the hope of providing new insights into TA deployment and the develop an understanding of the experiences of support that children with SEN receive. | Yes as it is exploring children and TAs views. Offered children drawing activities at the same time to support them to feel more comfortable and take their time when answering (drawing was believed to help reduce any pressure that the children may have felt during the interviews). | Yes, Separate interviews with children and TAs were carried out. Drawing activities were also available to the children. | Unknown how the children and TAs were identified. | Yes children's interviews and TA interviews are clearly described. The interview was designed in a way to help children to feel as comfortable as possible (it involved a drawing activity). In addition, two children chose to not partake in the drawing activities suggesting that the researchers enabled them to feel comfortable to say no to activities/elements of the research. The finding are clearly described in the results section and it is clear whether the quote is from a child or adult TA participant. | The researcher considered how to support the children during the interviews and therefore provided drawing activities that complemented the questions being asked. It is unknown how the author chose the settings involved in the research and it is unknown what relationship had with the school (e.g., link EP/previous student there). | The paper clearly states that parental consent and assent from the children prior to interviews was sought. | Categorical coding was used and an inductive approach to analysis was taken. It was noted that a coding framework was formed as the analysis took place. | Yes. The overarching theme is clearly stated. Five types of support were noted and these were shared appropriately and clearly. | The implications in relation to the need for a clearer definition of the TA role is highlighted in order to increase consistency. In addition, highlights the need for CYP to better understand the TA role too. |

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| In, out or somewhere in between? Disabled students' and teacher aides' experiences of school<br><br>Rutherford (2012) | The introduction states that the paper aims to contribute to the emerging body of research about the experiences of disabled children and teacher 'aides' in the New Zealand educational context. The paper also discusses the implications of the research. | This paper utilised semi-structured interviews with student and teacher aides. | Yes. The research interviewed students and teacher aides to gather both perspectives. Drawings, photos, pictorial communication cards signs, charts detailing school activities board games and taped verbal conversations were used to support the interviewees to be able to engage with the interview process. | The original thesis states that an 'opt-in' approach was taken. It shares that research posters were shared (but where these were shared is unclear) and people were able to express an interest. In response to expressions of interest potential participants were sent a participant information form. | Yes, the use of semi-structured interviews which were flexible in their approach (e.g., alternative methods to verbal communication were welcomed) enabled all participants to share their views. | This paper does not describe the author's relationship to the participants. The original thesis states that the researcher aimed to make the time with the students enjoyable. | This published paper does not explicitly mention ethics however the original thesis does. | The paper states that inductive and deductive analysis was carried out. In addition, the participants were invited to check that their views were interpreted and represented accurately. In text and/or picture form. It was described that a continuum was constructed to create a framework for understanding a range of factors which influence participants experiences. | Yes. The continuum is divided into: Everybody in inclusive educational contexts, Most students in assimilation in educational contexts and Disabled students out: exclusive educational contexts. | It is useful as it highlights the role of teacher aides. Micro and macro systemic and structural barriers were highlighted as well as implications for policy and practice. |

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| The Views of Children and Parents towards Higher Level Teaching Assistants Who Teach Whole Classes<br><br>Williams & O'Connor (2012) | The research aimed to see if they could utilise child and parent voices to identify what the impact of the workforce re-modelling agenda | Yes, 8 groups of children were interviewed as well as four groups of parents. Each group involved Year 6 children and was made up of 3 boys and 3 girls per group. The researchers tried to recruit children who all had varying levels of academic attainment within each group. From reading the paper it seemed that there was one group of children per school and one school involved 9 pupils (from Year 5). | Yes the research aimed to gather the perspectives of children and parents and, therefore, interviews were an appropriate way of gathering such information | The paper does not state how the primary schools that were 'targeted' for recruitment, were selected. | Yes, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed for analysis | The researchers mention that they informed participants about the purpose of the research and their right to withdraw. There was not any information about whether the researcher's had met the participants before or any connection that they may have had. | Yes, there is mention of BERA (British Educational Research Association) guidelines and the considerations that the researchers took into account after considering these (e.g., what child protection procedures would need to be followed if a disclosure was made). | Thematic analysis was applied to the verbatim interview transcriptions. Notably, Braun and Clarke were not referenced for this process. Instead Green & Thorogood, (2004) is the reference for such analysis approach. | The findings were clearly described and grouped into three key themes: Theme A - the HLTA is valued by children and parents, Theme B - the HLTA must have sufficient knowledge of curricula and pedagogy and Theme C - the HLTA requires status conducive to support effective classroom management. However, two themes state that they have four subthemes but only three subthemes are identified for each theme respectively. | The research highlights the value that children put onto the HLTA role. It also identified what children (and parents) perceive HLTA need to do/skills they need to have. The research also highlights potential directions for schools to consider. |

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| Assistance to pupils with physical disabilities in regular schools: promoting inclusion or creating dependency?<br><br>Egilson & Traustadottir (2009) | The aim of the research was to investigate the assistance provided to Icelandic pupils with physical disabilities in inclusive school settings. In addition the research aimed to explore which factors had the most critical influences on the provision of support. | Yes. This research utilised interviews using the School Setting interview (this is a 16-item interview-based assessment tool created by Hemmingson & Penman, 2005), with 9 pupils (out of 15 CYP who had participated). Informal discussions were also held to elicit information and gather a better understanding of the CYP's experiences in school. | The research gathered the views of the CYP, parents, teachers and teaching assistants. This meant that a range of views were gathered. One limitation is that only 9 out of 15 CYP were interviewed. One CYP chose not to partake in this of the study however the other four children were either deemed to be too young or 'they had problems with verbal expression'; this is a flaw of this study as the researchers did not seem to attempt to adapt their approach to ensure that all CYP were able to share their views. | The recruitment strategy involved purposive sampling. The researcher obtained a list of all CYP who had a disability record held by the Icelandic State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre. Then, the researcher contacted the parents of all potentially eligible participants by telephone to inform them about the research opportunity. From this, further information and consent were obtained by the parents and then the | Yes observation of the CYP as well as interviews directly with these participants were held. Interviews with parents and teachers were also carried out. Informal discussions with the CYP, teachers and teaching assistants took place. It seems an omission that the teaching assistants were not offered a formal interview. | The researcher highlights how they use reflexive analyses which suggests that they held in mind potential biases and lenses that they make view their interpretations through. The researchers also highlight that they contacted the parents of the CYP via the telephone to introduce the potential research opportunity. Given that some of the CYP could not access the interview | The researchers mention obtaining formal consent from parents and teachers. At no point is there mention of gaining assent from the children. The paper states that one child chose to not partake in the interview, suggesting that the researchers may have given the children the option to withdraw however, the paper does not state whether the child attended the interview and decided they did not wish to partake or whether this was expressed to a parent/teacher or teaching assistant who then informed the | The interview transcripts and written fieldnotes were subject to open coding (to begin the process of identifying themes). Within the paper, there is also mention of constant comparison whereby the open codes were compared and contrasted across cases to try and detect similarities and differences (this was in line with grounded theory which the research mentions in their introduction). Finally, there is mention of reflexive analysis whereby it was highlighted that the researchers read and re- | The statement of findings is clear; these include the notion that this research is consistent with other studies (e.g., clarification of the TAs role and responsibilities is important). The research explains the findings using two key streams: | The research does add to the body of literature exploring disabled children's experiences of schooling about how much assistance can support or hinder them. It would have been helpful to have more emphasis on the views and experiences of the children rather than diluting this information with three other perspectives too: teachers, parents and teaching assistants. |

| | | | | following parental consent, consent from the child's teacher was sought. It does not seem as though the children were asked if they like to participate. However, one child chose to not partake in the interview suggesting they were given the option. However, within the paper, there is no explicit mention of the children being aware that they were being observed in class nor, mention of them being informed of their right to withdraw. | | schedule due to not being verbal the researchers did not comment on how this may have been detrimental to the research findings (e.g., important voices were unheard during the research process). | researchers of this decision to not participate. Furthermore, the children were observed by the researchers during school and it is not clear if the children were aware of this observation as the teacher shared that the researchers were there to observe the general class not specific pupils. Therefore, there is concern that the children may have been deceived and therefore not given their assent. | read their notes and the transcripts whilst holding in mind any potential biases they may have formed or held. The research does note that a member check was done during the analysis phase by providing summaries of the findings to parents and asking for feedback. This would have been better going to the CYP though given that they are the main focus. | | |
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| Children's views of Teaching Assistants in primary schools<br><br>Fraser & Meadows (2008) | Acknowledged that there was little research into children's views of TAs. Aimed to explore their perceptions of 'who' teaches the children and what the TA does, who is in charge and to help in the classroom. Also aimed to find out if TA support was stigmatising. | Yes, an interview and survey were carried out with the children to gather their views. The questions were initially piloted and then minor changes were made in response to findings from this stage of the research. | They explained that they wanted to create the questionnaire in a way that was 'easy' for the participants to understand. They all mainly relied on tick boxes for the questionnaire (all but three questions). They also used focus groups (n=5) to carry out the interviews. | Yes, they worked with three different schools in three different counties. Only two of these were part of the interviews but all three completed the questionnaires. Relevant consent was obtained. | Yes the data collection methods were made clear and it was highlighted that the data had been collected in the chosen way (focus groups) to support children to feel more comfortable (as they were with familiar peers). Also, the questionnaire enabled the research team to gather many more views than would have been possible through interviews (due to time constraints). It is clear that SPSS was used to analyse the survey data (as it was mainly tick boxes). The researchers stated that the interviews | There is not any acknowledgement of why the geographical areas were chosen. Also no acknowledgement of reflexivity (the researchers' own positions and previous experiences). This is likely to be due to the constraints of publication word limits | Yes, parent/carer consent was obtained in line with BPS guidelines. Also, assent was obtained by the researchers checking in with the children that they were happy to take part before the interviews started. Also, it clearly stated that children whose families did not return the consent forms were not interviewed. It seemed as though consent was not perceived to be needed for participation in the survey (as it did not say that children without parental/carer consent did not partake in the survey). | It is clear what data came from the survey and what came from the interviews. However, the type of qualitative analysis employed is not stated. It seems as though the answers were interpreted holding in mind the quantitative questions. The key overarching concepts named are: Children's perceptions of the role of the Teaching Assistant; What distinction do children make between their teacher and TA?; Who do children work harder for?;What kinds of things does a TA do to help a child | Yes. The main findings were: Children perceived that TAs were there to support everyone (pupils, teachers and even parents). Felt they were important members of the school community. TAs needed to know a wealth of information of skills (this was thought to be identified in recognition of how many tasks TAs often support with). Seemed to be that children perceived TAs to be helpers rather than teachers this was possibly | It is helpful to develop our understanding of children's perceptions of TAs in the classroom. It also highlights and states how key it is to involve children in decision-making. Future directions could have been made clearer to support future research. It is wondered what else we can do with this information (other than ensure that children's voices are heard). |

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| | | | | | were transcribed and for analysis and recording. It is not shared what software (if any) was Data extraction information gathered the research assistants is available upon request used for this. | | | when they are stuck?; How do children feel being withdrawn from the classroom?; Children's perceptions of how they feel in the classroom; TAs and gender roles. Appropriate quotes from interviews and data presented in tables from the survey are clear in the paper. | due to the potentially part-time employment that TAs may be in. Children also perceived TAs to be training towards becoming a teacher and becoming more skilled at looking after children | |

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| Students with Disabilities' Perspectives of the Role and Impact of Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Education Settings.<br><br>Tews & Lupart (2008) | Aimed to extend previous work by Broer (2005) by interviewing children with Autism and Down syndrome. It aimed to find out about young people's views whilst they are in education about paraprofessional support. | Yes as the research aimed to gather the views of children. The paper highlighted that underlying methodology used was Basic Interpretive Qualitative Inquiry to try and understand a phenomenon. This also enabled the interviews to follow the pace of the participants (e.g., if they wanted to discuss for longer or shorter times this was possible). In addition, the researcher stated that they could pose the questions slightly differently depending on the needs | Yes, it enabled the researcher to ask the students the same interview questions to better understand their experiences of education. It was also stated that they were able to adapt the questions to meet the needs of the pupils. | A purposive sample was used. 8 participants took part (2* aged 3-6 years, 2* 7-12 years, 2* 13-17 years and 2* 18-30 years). These participants were selected from another project that had taken place 'Inclusion Across the Lifespan'. All of the young people were attending a public school in their home community (Alberta Canada). Three were autistic, two had developmental delays, one had Down syndrome, one participant had a brain injury and | Yes, the participants were interviewed in their family home; this could mean that they would have felt relatively comfortable within the interview environment (in comparison to an unfamiliar interview space). The interviews lasted between 15-45 minutes depending on the individual participant. | The researcher shared that they recruited participants from a participant pool from a different project. It is not clearly stated how well, if at all, the researcher knew the participants. The research paper states that cross-coding took place with a different researcher to support objectivity, different perspectives and potentially reduce bias | The paper does not state anything about gaining ethical approval. It is wondered if the consent would have been obtained through the project that the participants were recruited from. However, nevertheless, this current paper does not state anything about ethical considerations (such as consent/assent) | The analysis was completed by two researchers (separately through cross-coding). When differences in researchers' codes arose the lead researcher revisited the coding structure. | The paper highlights that parents and paraprofessionals believe teaching aide support to be important for CYP. However, the young people had mixed views. It helped some YP with socialising but then had a negative influence on socialising for others. In addition, it seemed that for some young people, such support led to a sense of learned helplessness and impacted their perceptions of their ability. This research posited the idea that this | This paper highlights mixed findings about the perceptions of TA support. Some CYP found it helpful other did not. Some YP had their social life hindered because of the paraprofessional I support; whilst others social life was supported by the paraprofessional support. Highlights the need for listening to YPs views about what they would like in regard to the support they receive. |

| | | of the participants. | | another participant was diagnosed with Prader-Willi syndrome. 4 participants attended school in a rural community and the other 4 participants attended school in an urban community. | | | | | specific study adds to this knowledge by highlighting that young people themselves, also perceive this support to be necessary. In addition, it highlighted that it added to the knowledge of teaching support within the Canadian context which builds upon other research. | |
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| The role of the special needs assistant supporting pupils with special educational needs in Irish mainstream primary schools<br><br>Logan (2006) | Yes, the research questions are clear. | Yes as the research aimed to gather the views of children who have SEN. | The research states that a highly structured interview approach was adopted. The authors provided a reference for their rationale which links to a paper that suggests this is helpful. It may have been better for a semi-structured approach to have been taken though, as this may have enabled the researcher to | It is not known for certain, how the CYP were recruited for this research. | The notion of facilitating an interview is appropriate. However, the usefulness of a highly structured interview may not have been the most effective. In addition, the interview schedule/topic guide is not available. | The researcher shares that they took care to ensure that the CYP felt able to withdraw if they wished to. It is not known if the researchers had previously met the children or if they had an existing connection with the education setting. | Yes, the researchers highlight that parental consent and pupil assent was obtained. In addition, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw. | There are examples of quotes from the CYP. The process of analysis is not certain. It was just noted that themes and categories of response were established. | Yes, the findings are clearly shared. It is also clear that the researchers have found similar findings to other research that has been conducted in this area. | Notably, this research was comprised of many parts (e.g., SNAs perspectives, teachers, principals, CYP and parents). As a result, the findings from each group individually are diluted and, therefore, the usefulness is limited. |

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| Supporting the inclusion of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in the primary school: the role of teaching assistants<br><br>Groom & Rose (2005) | Yes, 'the aim of the research was to identify factors contributing to effective practice by TAs in supporting the inclusion of pupils with SEBD aged 7–11 years (Key Stage 2).' | The interview questions and duration in which interviews lasted are not shared in the paper. | Yes, in theory, the approach was suitable. However, there was limited reporting of the data collected from the interviews with the CYP so the conclusions that can be drawn about this specific element of the research are limited. | Yes, this was a strength. The researchers started using an opportunity sampling approach (all headteachers were contacted in the area that the LEA served). Then, following this, the LEA and researcher purposively chose 5 schools which had varying demographics to create a sample that was relatively representative of the local area. | Yes, the research aimed to gather a range of perspectives to inform the conclusions that they made. | The relationship is not explored. The potential respondents are highlighted as being in the LEA geographical area but there is no mention of consent or assent. | There is no mention of ethics/consent/assent at all. | There is mention of 'key emerging themes' but no information about how these were identified (e.g., interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed using the process of thematic analysis). | Schools were generally positive about their commitment to include pupils with SEBD in mainstream classrooms and were aware of the challenges faced. Teaching assistants were widely perceived as effectively contributing to the inclusion of pupils with SEBD in the range of tasks and roles they undertake. Governors and parents recognised and appreciated the importance of this support. Pupils were aware of the impact of TA support on | The research does detail information for school leaders to refer to (in terms of what can make the support effective and ensure that the TA/LSAs feel supported). |

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| 'Whoops, I forgot David': children's perceptions of the adults who work in their classrooms<br><br>Eyres et al., (2010) | Yes, the paper aimed to find out children's views about the adults in their classrooms. | Yes the | Yes. The research design involved consulting the children directly to gather their views, in line with research that has suggested that this is an effective approach to take. 5 pilot interviews were carried out in children's family homes to assess the suitability of the questionnaire. Notably, the data from these pilot runs are not included in the analysis | The children were interviewed in pairs (usually two from each year group). These children were selected by the head or class teacher in the school that the children attended; the children generally represented a cross-section of the respective school's populations (in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and attainment). | The data was collected through an interview approach. This data was then transcribed and analysed using open coding to create a categorisation system. QRS NU*DIST software was used for this process. | Yes, the researchers acknowledge that due to time constraints they recruited six schools (5 in London and 1 in Cambridge) all of which the researchers knew of and had high number of teaching assistants. The researchers also highlighted that they built rapport with the younger children (those in Years 1,2 and 3) at the start of their interviews by asking them to draw a | Parental consent was sought by each school for the children to take part in the research. The children were interviewed in pairs, this may have been done to support the children to feel more comfortable when working with the researcher who was most probably an unfamiliar adult to them. In addition, the researchers explained how they informed the children about confidentiality | Open coding was used for the analysis. No information about member checking or intercoder reliability checks (e.g., more than one author codes the same transcript to see if similar codes are noted). | The findings are explained in the results section but there is not a clear statement that brings together the key messages of the research. | The research highlights that children felt TAs provided consistency when class teachers changed. They also highlighted that children often perceive TAs to be connected to certain children but this is not the same for their views about class teachers. Also, class teachers were seen to have more of a management role which sets the 'above' other adults in the class. |

| | | | | | | picture of all the adults in their classroom. This was supported by the researcher who may have asked questions about the adults drawn to help the children consider who each adult was and what their specific role was in the classroom. | | | | |
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| Supporting special needs in the mainstream classroom: children's perceptions of the adult role.<br><br>Bowers (1997) | To find out how CYP perceive additional adults in the classroom and find out whether they perceive they are needed to support the 'need' of the children or teachers | Yes, group interviews were used to ask the CYP 10 key questions. Both verbal and written responses were required by the CYP. When needed, an adult from the LEA learning support team would support the CYP with the writing. The verbal responses were recorded by the researcher (it is unknown if these were audio/video or fieldnote recordings). | Yes, the group interviews in whole class or smaller groups were conducted. This meant that the children could share their views in a group that were familiar to them. Although the questions were designed for the children to answer from the perspective of a friend; this poses problems as the children may find the concept of thinking from another's perspective challenging and, also, this means that the researcher was not gathering the children's direct experiences. | The exact recruitment strategy is unknown. | The children were asked to record their ideas and were supported, if necessary, to do this. In addition, the researcher kept a record of the verbal responses. However, it is wondered if the large group size may mean that the children did not share as much as they would have if they were interviewed in groups of approximately 3:1. in addition, it may be that the children did not write all of their response due to the demand that this may have placed upon them or they may have avoided sharing certain things due to | No, this is not mentioned at all | No, there is no mention of the ethical issues or considerations that were made (e.g., consent/assent/highlighting the CYP's right to withdraw at any point). | There is mention of using an approach that is in line with ethnographic research. The responses were coded by being allocated to categories (whether these categories were created inductively or deductively is unknown). | Yes, they identified that younger children perceived the TA/LSA help as for the teacher rather than the CYP. This seemed to be different for older children who seemed to hold the perception that the support was for the children rather than the teacher. | The researcher notes the key findings and sets these within the context of the pre-existing literature. Implications for policy and practice are noted |

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| | | | | | the length of writing or spelling skills that they would have required. | | | | | |
| The Dissection of Paraprofessional Support in Inclusive Education: 'You're in Mainstream With a Chaperone'

Whitburn (2013) | To investigate the power of the methodology proposed by Dewey that highlighted the need for those who have the possibility of being marginalised to be given opportunities to work towards social advancement and find out about young people (with a visual impairment) experiences of receiving paraprofessional support. | Yes, utilising a qualitative interview approach and focus group approach will have enabled the voices of individuals be captured. | Yes, the use of interviews (1:1) and focus groups will have enabled individuals to share their views and build upon the suggestions of others. | A purposive sampling approach was utilised. This involved contacting one secondary school which had learners who had a visual impairment. | The young people were able to partake in interviews and focus groups meaning that they will have had multiple opportunities to share their views about the questions asked. | Yes, the researcher explicitly shared that they have a visual impairment and they attended a similar education setting to the one they were carrying out the research in. It is shared that this is why the grounded theory was adopted when carrying out the analysis. | Yes. The researcher highlights how ethical approval was granted (by their university institution). It also states how the consent was obtained from parents and assent packages were created (using Braille and/or large print) to ensure the young people themselves were happy to take part. | Yes, the researchers explain how they got to their findings and clearly share what these findings are. | The conclusion clearly states the main findings of this research. | This research adds to the limited body of research which explores children's, specifically those who have a visual impairment, views of paraprofessional support. |

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| Perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities about their experiences with paraprofessional support.<br><br>Broer et al., (2005) | The aims are split into two different sections of the paper and could be grouped together to make it clearer. | Yes because the research is aiming to gather young people's views. | Yes the research utilised semi-structured interviews and openly adapted the approach used to support the young person being interviewed (e.g., altering phrasing as needed). | Yes the researcher went through two advocacy charities | Yes, the participants were invited to take part to share their views of paraprofessional support at school. Also, the researchers aimed to recruit participants who had finished education to reduce the likelihood of them feeling uncomfortable about compromising any existing relationships with paraprofessionals in school. | There is no mention of the researchers connection to the participants or their process of reflexivity. | Yes, the researchers mention obtaining consent prior to the participants attending the interviews. There is also mention of obtaining consent for audio recording the interviews by the participants or legal guardians. | The software used to support the analysis is shared and the steps that the researchers took are clearly outlined. | Yes, this is clear. The main finding being that the participants shared the exclusivity and primacy of the connection they have with the paraprofessional. | The research offers us a better understanding of how paraprofessionals can be viewed by young people and enables us to see how they can positively contribute to young people's school experiences. |

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| My Assistant and I: disabled children's and adolescents' roles and relationships to their assistants<br><br>Skär & Tam (2010) | Yes, the aim was to describe how children and adolescents with restricted mobility perceive their assistant and focus on the roles and relationship they have towards one another how the presence of an assistant influence children and young people's peer contacts. | Yes, they were hoping to gather the CYP's views so a qualitative methodology is appropriate. | Yes, the research used a qualitative semi-structured methodology. | Yes, the researcher worked with the participants in previous research, so had permission to re-contact the participants (via parents where necessary due to the CYPs age). | Yes, the research conducted semi-structured conversational interviews; these were carried out by the first author. The conversational and semi-structured approach meant that the questions could be adapted and expanded as needed to suit the participants. | Yes, the researchers have shared that they worked with participants in previous research. | The researcher notes that their research was approved by the affiliated university institution and highlighted that they had permission to re-contact the participants after the previous research they were involved with. However, there is no mention of re-gaining consent or assent. | Yes, the researcher notes that the interviews were transcribed and read through by two different authors from the perspective of Grounded theory. The primary author carried out most of the analysis but had frequent discussions with another author. The researcher started with open coding then the question: How do the participants perceive their situation when they have an assistant?' was held in mind. the texts were then coded and annotated. Axial coding was then carried out and selective | Yes, the author clearly states the main findings. | The research offers an additional perspective of how CYP perceive support from TA/LSAs. Interestingly, this research highlighted how CYP felt that the assistants knew everything about them but this was, understandably, not reciprocated by the adult. |

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| Supports for children with disabilities in regular education classrooms: an account of different perspectives in Flanders<br><br>Mortier et al., (2010) | The research states that it was part of a three-year research effort to investigate facilitating factors and barriers to inclusive education in Flanders. | Yes as the research is trying to find out what helps and what hinders inclusive education. Therefore open-ended opportunities for individuals to share their thoughts are key. | Yes as it gathers the views of children and the key adults who support them. There could have been more focus on the views of the children though. | The exact recruitment method is unknown. | Yes interviews and observations were carried out. | This is not mentioned. | There is no explicit mention of ethics or consent. This may have been more explicitly mentioned in other research connected to the three-year research effort. | The researcher papers details that two researchers coded the data inductively using a line-by-line approach. | Yes, the research highlights differences in what is perceived as key from the different participant groups. | This adds to the literature base. It is of particular usefulness for knowledge of the education context for Flanders. |

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| Researching the pupil voice: what makes a good teaching assistant?<br><br>Bland & Sleightholme (2012) | Aimed to find out, directly from children, what makes a good teaching assistant including the main personal and professional characteristics and the type of support they hoped for. | Yes because it aimed to gather children's views about their views of what would make a good TA. | The methods used did enable the children's views to be elicited. | It is unknown why the setting that was involved was chosen by the researchers. | Yes, the children were able to write down their views. | No, there is no mention of the relationship between the researcher and participants. | No, there is no mention of the ethical issues or considerations that were made (e.g., consent/assent/highlighting the CYP's right to withdraw at any point). | The researchers mention that they grouped the children's responses however, there is no explanation as to whether this was done inductively or deductively and how many researchers were involved in this process. | The findings are explained but there is not a clear statement that enables the reader to quickly ascertain the main findings. | The research adds to the body of literature however there are limitations (particularly with the questionnaire, for example, the children may have had different relationships with the TA vs. teacher and therefore this will have impacted whether they felt more able to talk to one or another. As a result, this limits the generalisability). |

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| Teaching assistant support for learning and wellbeing: the perspectives of secondary school pupils with special educational needs and disabilities<br><br>Porrino et al., (2024) | Explore how secondary school students with SEND view the support that they receive from TLSAs with their learning and well-being. | Yes, as it aimed to gather CYPs views and qualitative method would enable richer narratives to be captured. | Yes. The research utilised 1: 1 interview meaning that the CYP's views could be explored and further questions asked to clarify meaning etc | Yes. The researcher contacted schools they knew and then reached out to others. They also solely focussed on secondary schools to keep the focus relevant from children of this age. | Yes, qualitative interviews were carried out and transcribed verbatim. | The relationship between the schools is noted but it is not certain if the CYP involved had previously met with the researcher (e.g., for other involvement). | Yes, all participants were clearly given a pseudonym. Consent was sought from the school's headteacher and ethical approval for the research was granted by the University College London. | Yes, the researcher explicitly stated the process they went through when analysing the data: (data analysis, data familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining and naming themes). | Yes, the themes are clearly identified and there is a good summary at the start of the discussion to highlight the key finding around TA support being helpful for CYP's learning and these benefits outweighing the negatives. | This research brings positive findings of the usefulness of TA support from the perspectives of CYP themselves which is key given that they are the main stakeholders in TA support. |

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| Making sense of 'teaching', 'support' and 'differentiation': the educational experiences of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans and Statements in mainstream secondary schools<br><br>Webster & Blatchford (2018) | Yes. The research states that the aim is to provide descriptive information about the day-to-day experiences had by secondary-aged pupils who has 'high level' SEND. | Yes, the qualitative approach is suitable for gathering detailed information about the children's experiences. | Yes, the researchers presented qualitative case study data. It aimed to gather the views of children experiencing support for 'high-level' SEND. | The researchers utilised opportunities to access participants through local authority connections. Through these connections, 13-14 year olds who were thought to be eligible were invited to take part. Children with learning challenges primarily related to cognition and learning were prioritised as this aligned with earlier research (which adopted a mixed methods research approach). | Yes. Trainee educational psychologists carried out the data collection after receiving training. The researchers were each responsible for collating the information about an individual child (to be presented as a case study). Semi-structured interviews, amongst other data collection methods, were used. | The researchers mention that participants were recruited through local authority contacts. In addition, it is shared that Trainee Educational Psychologists carried out the data collection. However, whether the trainee educational psychologist's knew the children and the relationship they had during the involvement is not disclosed. | Yes how consent was obtained is clearly noted in the paper. Assent from the children is not mentioned though. | The researchers note how they used a deductive approach to arrange the reports. Then after arranging these (using a sample of 13 of a possible 49 reports) they carried out inductive analysis to notice additional 'points of interest'. This was done so that the researchers could check that the original 13 headings were reflective of the data within the reports. | Yes the findings are clear that children with SEND have markedly different experiences to those without SEND. They also identified that high levels of TA support meant that these children often spent time out of the main classroom. Also reflected research findings from the DISS (Blatchford et al., 2011) research about children with SEND receiving a poorer pedagogical diet' as TAs approaches were different to teachers. | This research contributes to the literature base as it highlights that TA practice has not changed as much as was suggested in earlier research (e.g., from the DISS project Blatchford et al., 2011).<br><br>This research helps to increase the knowledge base about how children with SEND feel about their secondary school experiences, particularly concerning engagement with TAs. |

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*Note.* Information gathered by the Research Assistants for the CASP qualitative data extraction is available upon request

**Appendix F The quantitative scores given to the individual papers utilising the CASP questions**

| Name of article | Question 1<br><br>Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research? | Question 2<br><br>Is a qualitative methodology appropriate? | Is it worth continuing? | Question 3<br><br>Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research? | Question 4<br><br>Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research? | Question 5<br><br>Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue? | Question 6<br><br>Has the relationship between the researcher and participants been adequately considered? | Question 7<br><br>Have ethical issues been taken into consideration? | Question 8<br><br>Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous? | Question 9<br><br>Is there a clear statement of findings? | Question 10<br><br>How valuable is the research? | Total score |
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| Supporting special needs in the mainstream classroom: children's perceptions of the adult role.<br><br>Bowers (1997) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 13 |
| My Assistant and I: disabled children's and adolescents' roles and relationships to their assistants<br><br>Skär & Tam (2010) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 19 |
| Perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities about their experiences with paraprofessional support | 1 | 2 | Y | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 17 |

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| Broer et al., (2005) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Supporting the inclusion of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in the primary school: the role of teaching assistants<br><br>Groom & Rose (2005) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 14 |
| The role of the special needs assistant supporting pupils with special educational needs in Irish mainstream primary schools<br><br>Logan (2006) | 2 | 2 | Y | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 14 |
| Children's views of Teaching Assistants in primary schools<br><br>Fraser & Meadows (2008) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 17 |
| Students with Disabilities' Perspectives of the Role and Impact of Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Education Settings.<br><br>Tews & Lupart (2008) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 17 |
| Assistance to pupils with physical disabilities in regular schools: promoting inclusion or creating dependency?<br><br>Egilson & Traustadottir (2009) | 2 | 2 | Y | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 16 |
| 'Whoops, I forgot David': children's perceptions of | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 19 |

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| the adults who work in their classrooms<br><br>Eyres et al., (2010) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Supports for children with disabilities in regular education classrooms: an account of different perspectives in Flanders<br><br>Mortier et al., (2010) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 15 |
| Researching the pupil voice: what makes a good teaching assistant?<br><br>Bland & Sleightholme (2012) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 11 |
| In, out or somewhere in between? Disabled students' and teacher aides' experiences of school<br><br>Rutherford (2012) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 15 |
| The Dissection of Paraprofessional Support in Inclusive Education: 'You're in Mainstream With a Chaperone'<br><br>Whitburn (2013) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 20 |
| The Views of Children and Parents towards Higher Level Teaching Assistants Who Teach Whole Classes<br><br>Williams & O'Connor (2012) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 18 |
| Understanding the role of the Teaching Assistant: | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 18 |

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| Comparing the views of pupils with SEN and TAs within mainstream primary schools<br><br>Wren (2017) | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Making sense of 'teaching', 'support' and 'differentiation': the educational experiences of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans and Statements in mainstream secondary schools<br><br>Webster & Blatchford (2018) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 19 |
| The perspectives and experiences of children with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools regarding their individual teaching assistant support<br><br>Pinkard (2021) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 18 |
| Stories of Surveillance and Resistance: Young People with Dwarfism and Teaching Assistants in Secondary Schools in the United Kingdom<br><br>Ktenidis (2023) | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 19 |
| Teaching assistant support for learning and wellbeing: the perspectives of secondary school pupils with special educational needs and disabilities | 2 | 2 | Y | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 19` |

| Porrino et al., (2024) | | | | | | | | | | | |
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*Note.* CASP quantitative scoring information gathered by the Research Assistants is available upon request

## Appendix G Data Extraction Table

| Author, date and Country | Paper Title | The study aims/focus | Sampling approach | Participant information | Data collection method | Analysis approach | Themes/findings | Quality assurance rating (out of 20) |
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| Ktenidis, (2023)<br><br>United Kingdom | Stories of Surveillance and Resistance: Young People with Dwarfism and Teaching Assistants in Secondary Schools in the United Kingdom | To explore the experiences of 14 young people with dwarfism who were supported by a TA at secondary school and 'illustrate how support both re-inscribes cultural beliefs about disability as a problem to be managed and/or fixed and institutional power over disabled people.' | The researchers shared that the recruitment was 'mediated' by gatekeepers such as administrators on Facebook groups and charities and parents of participants who were under 16 years of age.<br><br>Snowballing was also an effective strategy that was reported to be used to help with recruitment.<br><br>The researcher attended a meeting that was run annually by an association for | 14 participants between the ages of 12-30 years of age. 9 had support from a general classroom assistant and 5 had a one-to-one classroom assistant (notably, the older participants were more likely to have had one-to-one support, highlighting a shift in TA deployment in more recent years). All participants were diagnosed with Dwarfism.<br><br>Some participants were still in school and others were reflecting on their previous experiences in school. | Participants were offered different approaches to taking part in the research; in person focus groups, online interview (1:1 or 1:2 or 1:1 with a chaperone) (the participant's mother), in person interview (1:1 or 1:2), email interview. | Interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed through a narrative thematic approach (Riessman, 2005).<br><br>The researcher read the 'stories' multiple times to enable familiarisation with the data. Then manual colour-coding and then the colour codes were succeeded by the identification of themes and subthemes. | The researcher used the Foucault's model of surveillance and resistance but found that the participant's 'stories' went beyond this model. The results were divided into three sections dependent on the type of surveillance identified:<br>- Stories of panoptic surveillance<br>- Stories of panaural surveillance<br>- Stories of synoptic surveillance<br><br>In stories of panoptic surveillance (a sense of hearing by being overheard) the researchers share that, in line with the notion of panopticism whereby 'a prison is designed in such a way so that inmates always feel they are being watched', the young people shared that they were under surveillance by their TAs. This was explained as the TAs having two roles: facilitating behaviour management and keeping students on task. | 19 |

| | | | people with dwarfism. | | | | In stories of panaural surveillance, participants shared that the presence of a TA impacted the conversations that they had with their friends; often not talking about topics such as puberty as this felt uncomfortable when adults were around. It was shared that some participants found the presence of TA helpful (particularly if they were younger as they shared 'helpful tips' however, older TAs for some, exacerbated their hesitancy to talk about certain topics).

In stories of synoptic surveillance, the participants shared how they felt they were always being watched (as they had a TA in addition to a teacher watching them). The researcher also shared that participants would begin to stand up to their TA but this would then be seen as disobedience and something that needed to be punished (e.g., removing the students from the classroom).

This paper added to the body of literature in identifying how participants can feel watched or 'under surveillance' at all times in school, not just during teaching time. It also highlighted the types of | |

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| | | | | | | surveillance that participants reported experiencing whilst in school and highlights the need for adults to foster agency and ensure that all young people are seen as valuable and not passive within their education. | |
| Pinkard (2021)<br><br>United Kingdom | | Explore the perspectives and experiences of pupils with SEN in mainstream primary schools regarding their individual TA support. | Purposive sampling. The SENCos at local schools were contacted asking if they had any children who were in Year 6 (final year or primary school) with an EHCP (or equivalent) and received at least 25 hours of TA support per week.<br><br>In five of the eight primary schools (that the participants came from over 20% of children were eligible for free school meals (a measure of lower household income). | 10 children aged 10-11 years. All from the South of England. All children had an EHCP; special educational needs included: Autism, physical disabilities, learning difficulties, hearing impairment ADHD and SEMH needs). | Semi-structured interviews were carried out. These ranged from a duration of 11-52 minutes (depending on the individual participant). The interview schedule was comprised of questions relating to different elements of TA support (e.g., comparisons to teachers, characteristics of the TA and examples of the participants and TA working together). | Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Used NVivo (10) for the analysis.<br><br>Formed five overarching themes. Each of these had subthemes (ranging from four to seven subthemes per overarching theme). | Overarching themes identified were:<br>- Logistics of my TA support<br>- What is my TA like?<br>- What is my ideal TA like?<br>- Teacher versus TA comparison<br>- What impact does my TA have for me?<br><br>Subthemes identified and connecting to overarching themes:<br><br>Logistics of my TA support<br>- Working outside of the classroom<br>- Proximity<br>- Frequency<br>- Duration<br>- TA role<br>- Thinking about secondary school<br>- Independent working<br><br>What is my TA like?<br>- Positives<br>- Negative<br>- What does my TA think of me? | 18 |

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| | | | | | | - What do others think of my TA?<br><br>What is my ideal TA like?<br>- Role<br>- Characteristics<br>- The things she says<br>- Emotional Impact<br><br>Teacher versus TA comparison<br>- How well they know me<br>- Differences in skills and impact<br>- Role<br>- No differences/I'm unsure<br><br>What impact does my TA have for me?<br>- Academic<br>- Social<br>- Emotional & Behavioural<br>- Physical<br><br><br>They found that TAs were reported to support children to access the curriculum and supported their emotional well-being and social inclusion.<br><br>The findings highlighted that this pupil/TA relationship could sometimes, unfortunately, lead to the child being separated from the main class teacher. | |

| Wren, (2017) United Kingdom | Understanding the role of the Teaching Assistant: Comparing the views of pupils with SEN and TAs within mainstream primary schools | To develop an understanding of how pupils and TAs understand the TA role within mainstream settings. An aim was to compare the views of the children with the views of TAs themselves to understand differences and similarities in perceptions as well as better understand children with SEN's experiences of super support. | Emailed lead author – no response. Unclear in the write up. | 11 students (age 6-7) (8 male, 3 female) with a SEN 'statement'. All pupils attended a mainstream school and were able to articulate their thoughts verbally 10 of the 11 participants had social communication needs identified as an area of need on their SEN statement. All had at least 15 hours of TA support per week. | Semi-structured interviews accompanied by drawing activities (these were used at the same time as the interview to support children to feel more comfortable and thus support them to take more time to consider and formulate their verbal answer). | Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was then analysed inductively using categorical coding (this reportedly enabled the researchers to capture themes, differences and similarities in how the TA role was spoken about by the child and TA participants). | Differences found in relation to the children versus the TAs perception of the TA role.

5 key themes were formed:

Academic support: children mentioned this more than any other category of support during their interviews. 9 out of 11 pupils mentioned this type of support in their interviews. Pupils often spoke about being helped with work or writing by the TA. 6 of 11 children also referred to this type of help within their drawings. Two children spoke specifically about reading support and one pupil mentioned ICT support.

Social support: two pupils spoke about how their TA supported them during break and lunchtimes. Three pupils spoke about how the TA would play with them in school as part of their role (e.g., one child said the TA would play inside at break/lunchtime). One pupil only spoke about their TA support as linked to play. This potentially supports other research which has identified that children often view TAs as friends more than adult teaching figures.

Behavioural support: this was prominent within the TAs | 18 |
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| | | | | | | reflections but not the children's.

Physical Support: two TAs mentioned this but this was not mentioned by the pupils at all.

Non-specific help: four of the children mentioned this in their interviews 'Mrs L just helps me'…'she helps'.

Two of the interviewee children received targeted intervention support throughout the week from the TA(s). Neither child reflected on any specific support from the TA(s) during their interviews

Individual/class support: 8 of the 11 interviewed children talked about individual or group support. Six of the 8 children believed that the TA was there to work specifically with them individually (rather than the whole class). Notably, the children seemed to hold a type of ownership over the TA support 'mine' 'she only helps me'. All pupils who spoke about the TA in this type of way had their own allocated TA rather than gaining support from a class TA. Two of the eleven pupils had opposite views and expressed that the TAs were not just there to support them but, instead, there to support the whole class (notably, these | |
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| | | | | | | | two children were supported by the class TA rather than having someone specifically there for them). This suggests that the children had a good understanding about whether a member of staff was there exclusively for them or for more general class support. However, one child did have their own allocated TA (for 25 hours per week) but believed that they were there to support all children. | |
| Rutherford, (2012) New Zealand | In, out or somewhere in between? Disabled students' and teacher aides' experiences of school | The paper aims to contribute to the emerging body of research about the experiences of disabled children and teacher 'aides' in the New Zealand educational context. | The research utilised opt-in approach by advertising their study (it is unknown where the study was advertised). | 15 families and 30 teacher aides completed PIS forms.<br><br>10 students (out of 15 initial expressions of interest) took part (5 withdrew for personal reasons). Participants ranged from 8 to 17 years of age. | Yes, the use of semi-structured interviews which were flexible in their approach (e.g., alternative methods to verbal communication were welcomed) enabled all participants to share their views.<br><br>To ensure that all CYP participants were able to engage, the researcher utilised various approaches to communication. This included offering the children opportunities to record their ideas through drawings, pictorial communication books, photos, using signs, a board game, | The data was analysed using both inductive and deductive approaches.<br><br>Participants were able to check how the researcher had interpreted their views through a text and picture summary titled: What I Think About School and Teacher Aides. | The researcher conceptualised the findings onto a continuum which was comprised of three key parts:<br>- Everybody in: inclusive educational contexts<br>- Most students in: assimilation in educational contexts a<br>- Disabled students out: exclusive educational contexts.<br><br>It is noted that a continuum was created as this provided a framework for understanding a range of factors that influenced participants experiences (both the CYP and teacher aides' themselves).<br><br>In Everybody in: inclusive educational contexts – it was identified that the optimum use of teacher aides was when they had worked in collaboration | 15 |

| | | | | | taped verbal conversations and charts detailing potential school activities. | | with the teacher and the students all felt as though they were 'in' the main classroom environment (e.g., they were working separately to their peers).In inclusive environments the class teacher and students were said to value the teacher aide as an additional human resource.<br><br>In: Most students in: assimilationist educational contexts<br><br>Within this theme it was shared that the teaching aide acted as a 'type of admission ticket' e.g., if a pupil wished to join a mainstream class this was only possible if the teacher aide was available. It was described by the researcher as the teacher being a host to the student and teacher aid as though they were a package deal'. This theme was also used to explain how some teachers were seen to have to divide their time equally between all students and therefore, those who needed extra support was not entitled this this, hence the presence of the allocated teacher aide.<br><br>For Disabled students out: exclusive educational contexts. From the children's perspectives the teacher aides were there to 'help weak | |
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| | | | | | | | kids…with disabilities'. This particular child suggested that this was not the main class teacher's job. In addition the children believed that the teacher aid was there to support the children socially too 'no one will get on with me' and another child said, 'was sort of like a teacher and a friend'. In addition, children reflected on how much the teacher aids supported them, they were asked how school would have been if they didn't have a teacher aide, the young person replied:<br><br>'That would have been a huge struggle. I don't think I would be here today without those teacher aides. They pushed me and stuff like that. You have got to have someone that can push you beyond that next boundary.' | |
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| Williams & O'Connor (2012)<br><br>United Kingdom | The Views of Children and Parents towards Higher Level Teaching Assistants Who Teach Whole Classes | The aims were to find out from children and parents about the impact of the workforce remodelling agenda in relation to HLTAs teaching whole classes. | The researchers 'targeted' primary schools in summer 2008 and spring 2009. The researcher does not explain how they chose which schools to approach | The study interviewed 8 groups of children (6 children per group 3 boys: 3 girls) all of whom were in Year 6. There was an exception to this as one group had 9 pupils in the interview group and this also included some | Interview groups were carried out and these were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. | Thematic analysis was carried out on the interview transcripts. The paper states that 'interviews were transcribed and analysed at meetings of researchers, utilising thematic analysis. This involved comparing accounts to identify | Three key themes were identified during the analysis.<br><br>Theme A: The HLTA is valued by children and parents. Within this theme it was identified that children spoke with great enthusiasm about the HLTA within their school. There was four key subthemes identified for this theme: | 18 |

| | | | nor, how this approach was taken (e.g., direct emails, posters shared etc). | year 5 pupils. There was a mix of academic achievement levels throughout the groups to try and ensure that a range of voices were heard and therefore different views were captured. | | the 'themes' common in the dataset' – it is not clear if researchers independently coded the data and then got together to compare and discuss their findings or if it was completed together. | - teaching assistants need a good sense of humour<br>- a 'soft' touch<br>- a good TA needs good personal attributes<br><br>Theme B: the HLTA must have sufficient knowledge of curricula and pedagogy. This was connected to the way that children recognised the difference between their class teachers. This was also divided into four subthemes:<br>- ability to help 'all' children<br>- the HLTA as 'teacher'<br>- the TA as 'assistant'<br><br>Theme C: the HLTA requires status conducive to support effective classroom management. This theme is concerned with how the HLTA is perceived in regard to their status. It was delt that the status of the HLTA had a big impact on their potential to successfully work with whole classes. This theme identified that children seem to perceive the primary workforce differently to those who determine the possible structures of the workforce. This was divided into four subthemes:<br>- children's understanding of different roles | |

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| | | | | | | | - evidence of a hierarchy?<br>- definition<br>- children are enthusiastic about HLTAs and value them | |
| Egilson & Traustadottir (2009)<br><br>Iceland | Assistance to pupils with physical disabilities in regular schools: promoting inclusion or creating dependency? | To examine the assistance provided to pupils with physical disabilities within inclusive school settings. Another aim was to identify which factors had the most critical influences on the provision of support. Two key research questions were used within the research:<br>- What are the characteristics of the assistance provided to pupils with physical disabilities in regular schools?<br>- What are the factors that affect the assistance provided to pupils with physical disabilities in | The sampling approach involved contacting parents of children who were registered on the Icelandic State Diagnostic and Counselling Centre disability records. Parents who then wished for themselves and/or child to partake were sent participant information forms and a consent form to complete. Upon receipt of consent, the child's class teacher was also sent a consent form to complete. | 14 children partook in the research (9 boys and 5 girls). Each of the pupils had a physical disability. such disabilities included Cerebral Palsy, Myelomeningocele and neuro-muscular disorders. In addition, at least one parent and one teacher were interviewed for each of the 14 CYP.<br><br>Pupils were aged between 6-12 years of age. Two pupils were selected from each grade level from 1st to 7th.<br><br>When selecting participants school size and location were also | Data was collected through observation of the CYP in class as well as informal discussions which were recorded as fieldnotes by the researchers and interviews using the School Setting Interview (SSI) Hemmingsson & Penman, 2005), as a guide. | Analysis was carried out using open coding to identify themes and to categorise the comments that related to the assistance offered to the pupils within different settings within school. These codes were then compared and contrasted to detect similarities and differences across the transcripts/field notes.<br><br>Reflexive analyses were also carried out, the coded transcripts and notes where then re-read to consider the initial reactions and thoughts during the observations and interviews.<br><br>A member check by the CYP's parents | The themes that were identified within this research were:<br>- Roles and responsibilities<br>- Quantity and content<br>- Proximity to the pupil with physical disability<br>- School priorities<br>- Independence and autonomy of the child<br>- The relationship between the teacher and the assistant<br><br>For the purposes of this SLR, only 'quantity and content of support' will be utilised as this theme was correlated with a direct quote from a child, the other themes all seem to have bene informed by the parent and teachers comments.<br><br>Quantity and content of support – CYP reflected on how they had little to not control of over the amount of TA assistance they received each day. One pupil shared that they felt that their different TAs needed time to get used to him and his needs when it should have | 16 |

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| | | regular schools? | | considered; 8 CYP lived in the capital area, 2 in other urban communities and 4 lived in rural areas. 1 of the children attended a 'special class's on a part-time basis whereas all other pupils where in a mainstream classroom full-time.<br><br>In total, the participants pool of 14 CYP were from 11 different schools (some schools had more than pupil involved in this research).<br><br>8 pupils had full-time TA assistance and 3 had part-time assistance. 3 pupils did not have any specific allocated time with a teaching assistant. | | was also carried out to gather feedback about the interpretations that had been made by the researchers. | been more than the pupil needed time to get used to the adults who were carrying out his personal care. | |
| Fraser & Meadows (2008) | | | To better understand children's perceptions of TAs. With a particular focus on identifying who they | Opportunity sampling. Children and TAs were invited to take | 419 children between the ages of 7-11 took part in the questionnaire. | Questionnaires took approximately 10 minutes to complete. | SPSS analysis for the questionnaire and qualitative 'data analysis' by transcribing the | The themes identified were:<br>- Children's perceptions of the role of the Teaching Assistant | 17 |

| United Kingdom | | perceive to 'teach', be in charge; and what TAs do 'to help' children. | part if they were in one of the schools that the researcher was able to facilitate the research in. | 86 children (47 girls, 39 boys) between the ages of 5-11 took part in the interviews.<br><br>21 TAs (all female) worked across primary age ranges and were a mix of full- and part-time employed staff. None of the TAs were HLTAs. One was a qualified teacher but had chosen to work in a TA role. | There is not a specified time for how long the interviews took. These were facilitated in groups of 5 children (all from the same class). | interview audio for the interview groups. | - What distinction do children make between their teacher and TA?<br>- Who do children work harder for?<br>- What kinds of things does a TA do to help a children when they are stuck?<br>- How do children feel being withdrawn from the classroom?<br>- Children's perceptions of how they feel in the classroom<br>- TAs and gender roles.<br><br>The main findings were:<br><br>Children perceived that TAs were there to support everyone (pupils, teachers and even parents).<br><br>Felt they were important members of the school community.<br><br>TAs needed to know a wealth of information of skills (this was thought to be identified in recognition of how many tasks TAs often support with).<br><br>Seemed to be that children perceived TAs to be helpers rather than teachers this was possibly due to the potentially part-time employment that TAs may be in. Children also perceived TAs to be training | |
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| | | | | | | | towards becoming a teacher and becoming more skilled at looking after children<br><br>Younger children believed it was because their teacher was employed first so there wasn't space for another teacher hence the TA role.<br><br>Younger children liked being educated outside of the classroom by the TA whereas this was not the same for older children who were reported to share feelings of 'embarrassment'.<br><br>Did not seem that children were more likely to ask TA for help over the teacher. There were mixed views about this<br><br>Females were perceived to take on a TA role (this may have been because the children had only had opportunities to work with female TAs). | |
| Tews & Lupart (2008)<br><br>Canada | Students With Disabilities' Perspectives of the Role and Impact of Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Education Settings | This paper aimed to further the initial research ideas of Broer et al., (2005). This research interviewed children with intellectual and developmental disabilities and aimed to gather the views of children and young | The sampling approach involved purposive sampling through the use of an existing participant pool from 'Inclusion Across the | All participants were attending a public school: 4 were in rural and 4 in urban communities. 2 participants were 3-6 years of age. | The data was collected through a semi-structured interview approach. These interviews were facilitated on a 1:1 basis and carried out in the young people's family homes. The researcher followed | The interview transcripts were recorded and transcribed verbatim. These were then coded and analysed to identify themes. The researcher states that the underlying | Fiver overarching themes were formed:<br>  -   Impact on peer interactions<br>  -   Impact of student autonomy<br>  -   Paraprofessional attributes<br>  -   Impact on teacher responsibility | 17 |

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| | | people with such disabilities about their experiences with paraprofessional support whilst they were still in the education context. Their exact research question was: according to students with disabilities in inclusive education settings, what is the role and impact of having paraprofessional supports? | Lifespan' project | 2 participants were 7-12 years of age.<br><br>2 participants were 13-17 years of age.<br><br>2 participants were 18-30 years of age.<br><br>3 participants were autistic, one was diagnosed with Down syndrome, one had a diagnosis of Prader-Willi and one young person had a brain injury. | the lead of the participants and therefore the time that interviews took varied from 15-45 minutes. Open-ended questions were used to enable participants to share anything that they felt was relevant of important to share. The paper states that direct questions were asked as needed, to support the participants with their understanding. Vocabulary and comprehension were also held in mind and the researcher was mindful to not influence the participant's responses by ensuring that they did not ask leading questions.<br><br>The paper also alludes to a form of triangulation taking place by using interview data from parent/guardians, teacher and the education assistant to 'establish the legitimacy of participant data and | methodology adopted was Basic Interpretive Qualitative Inquiry. The rationale for this approach was that the method enables researchers to discover and better understand a phenomenon from the perspectives of people involved.<br><br>A peer-reviewer also coded the transcripts to support reliability of the coding structure. | -     Impact on school inclusion<br><br>Theme one: education assistant (EA's) impact on peer interactions. This was about how the EAs role impacted how often and how the students interreacted with their peers at school. It was then divided into four subthemes:  EA strategies, Peer Perceptions, Extent of Engagement and EA necessity: Socialisation.<br><br>Theme two: EA impact on student autonomy. This was then divided into three subthemes: Student Independence, Educational Assistant Proximity and EA necessity.<br><br>Theme three: educational assistant attributes. This theme was divided into two subthemes, Likes and dislikes and EA role.<br><br>Theme four: EA impact on teacher role (notably this is termed differently to what the researcher's say they name the theme as above 'teacher responsibility' here it's 'teacher role' this was then divided into two subthemes: Time spent and Learning.<br><br>Theme five: EA impact on school inclusion; three subthemes were formed for this | |

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| | | | | | enhance credibility'. However, there is not sufficient detail of what this involved (e.g., did the researcher meet separately with parents/teachers and support staff?). | | overarching theme: Type of assistance, Solo activities and Group involvement. | |
| Logan, (2006) Republic of Ireland | The role of the special needs assistant supporting pupils with special educational needs in Irish mainstream primary schools | The research aimed to answer four research questions; one of which is particularly relevant for this SLR: 'What are the perceptions of pupils (parents, teachers, principals and SNAs themselves) of the role? | It is unknown how the researcher invited/selected the child participants. | 3 CYP took part in this research. All of whom were supported by a SNA. No information is shared by the researchers about the participants (e.g., gender, learning needs etc). it is assumed that they would have been CYP of primary school age as the SNA that were recruited were from primary schools. | Data was collected via '…very structured' interviews.<br><br>Interviews were recorded and then transcribed. | The data analysis explanation within the paper is sparse. The researcher shared that the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher and were analysed to establish themes and categories of response. | The findings from the children's perspectives:<br><br>The SNA helps with schoolwork.<br>Can impact social relationships (both positively and negatively). | 14 |
| Groom & Rose (2005)<br><br>United Kingdom | Supporting the inclusion of pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in the primary: the role of teaching assistants | To identify factors contributing to effective practice by TAs in supporting the inclusion of pupils with SEBD | An opportunity sampling approach was taken. The researcher contacted all Headteachers in the LA that the researcher was conducting the research in. | 10 pupils between the ages of 7-11 took part in the semi-structured interviews. | Data was collected from the CYP via semi-structured interviews. Information about how long these interviews lasted has not been provided. | There is no explicit mention of how the interviews were analysed but there is reference in the text to 'key emerging themes' which suggests a thematic analysis approach may have been taken. | There was one evident theme that was identified specifically in relation to the CYP's interview data, this was related the relationships that TAs can form with CYP:<br><br>'They are there for you. They back you up. You feel like if you've got a problem they will help you get through it …' | 14 |

| | | | Following this, the researcher, in discussions with officers at the LEA, used a purposive sampling approach as they chose 5 schools that reflected the diversity within the area to partake in the interview stage. These interviews were carried out with line managers of TAs, classroom teachers, TAs, CYP, parents and governors. | | | | (PUPIL)'They're like teachers, they tell you what you have to do and they will help you.'<br><br>(PUPIL)'Well, they help the people who are like dyslexic, we have got some people like that and they help us with work we don't understand, the hard work, and they help.' | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Eyres et al., (2004)<br><br>United Kingdom | 'Whoops, I forgot David': children's perceptions of the adults who work in their classrooms | The paper aimed to find out children's views about the adults in their classrooms. | The researchers purposively contacted six schools (5 in London and one in Cambridge) due to time constraints. The primary schools were known to the researchers and had high numbers of | 78 children between the ages of 5 – 11 years, took part in this research. Two children from each year group at primary school took part, following obtaining parental permission. The participants were said to represent a cross-section of each school's population (in | Data was collected through an interview with the children; children were interviewed in pairs. The researcher used a 14-item interview schedule and adopted this flexibly to enable them to prompt the children to talk about the different adults and their roles within the classroom environment. | Open coding was used for the analysis. No information about member checking or intercoder reliability checks (e.g., more than one author codes the same transcript to see if similar codes are noted). | Children perceived TAs to do more group work and teachers to carry out whole class involvement. In addition, the assignment to such groups was perceived to be because of ability and there was a belief about 'higher' groups having a higher status.<br><br>Teachers were seen to have more of a management role which distinguished them from the TA. | 19 |

| | | | TAs. Class and Headteachers selected the children who were invited to take part in the research. Parental permission was sought by each school. | terms of ethnicity, gender, age and attainment). | | | TAs were often connected with the term 'help(er/s)' when children were asked about what the difference was between the TA and class teacher adults in their class they found it tricky to clearly distinguish. The findings from this particular question are presented in Table 2 of the paper. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bowers, (1997)<br><br>United Kingdom | Supporting special needs in the mainstream classroom: children's perceptions of the adult role | To determine the types of explanations which children made for the explanation of additional adults in the classroom. This research hoped to explore whether the CYP embraced the 'need' on part of the CP or whether the 'need' was viewed as being on the teacher. | The research does not state how the schools were invited to take part in the research. All classes were reported to have one child with a 'statement' (now referred to as an EHCP). | 33 classes in 27 schools took part (713 students in total).<br><br>70 participants were aged 5-7 years.<br><br>515 participants were 7-11 years of age.<br><br>128 participants were 11-16+ years of age.<br><br>No information about gender or SEN needs were obtained. | The data was collected through verbal discussions in the form of a group interview. Participants were also required to write down their answers (a representative from the LEA was there to offer children support with writing if required. | The analysis was completed via a qualitative analysis approach. The research mentions allocating data to categories as this is 'suggested for ethnographic research'. | The results in the paper are presented in the following categories:<br><br>The receipt of support (this is classified into five 'broad types):<br>- Help for the teacher<br>- The disciplinary function<br>- Pupil-focused attention/help for the child<br>- The support teacher as lower-order professional<br><br><br>Attribution to others (the children were asked how their friends may feel if they received support from a TA/LSA) this required the children to give an attribution of opinion to others. The majority of these responses were 'I don't know' | 13 |

| | | | | | | | or were classified as positive or negative (e.g., I think that John likes it' or 'they think that they not clever'). | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | Further issues (this encapsulated the examples given by a few children which suggested that they felt feelings of frustration when support was offered and not felt needed), another response linked to the economics of extra support (e.g., a child wondered if both adults were paid the same)). | |
| Whitburn (2013)<br><br>Australia | The Dissection of Paraprofessional Support in Inclusive Education: 'You're in Mainstream With a Chaperone' | To investigate the power of the methodology proposed by Dewey that highlighted the need for those who have the possibility of being marginalised to be given opportunities to work towards social advancement and find out about young people (with a visual impairment) experiences of receiving paraprofessional support. | Purposive sampling. A secondary school was identified and approached as they had YP on roll who had visual impairments. | 5 young people (4 boys, 1 girl) between the ages of 8-17 years of age. All were legally blind but had varying levels of impaired sight. | Utilised the Grounded Theory approach.<br><br>1:1 Interviews and semi-structured focus groups were carried out. These interviews lasted between 20-60 minutes. | The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim.<br><br>Data analysis used open, axial and selective coding. The axial coding involved taking a central theme that was identified through open coding and then placing other relevant categories around it to see how they interact. | Light (facilitative) and heavy (inhibitive) paraprofessional support were identified.<br><br>Light paraprofessional support included:<br>- Having resources prepared and Braille transcriptions made<br>- Discreet in-class support<br>- Provision of specialised equipment<br><br>Heavy paraprofessional support included:<br><br>Negative social implications of paraprofessional support:<br><br>-Authoritarian approaches of paraprofessionals<br><br>-Overcompensating paraprofessionals | 20 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | -Paraprofessionals' assumptions of responsibility<br><br>Demographic Contribution to Discomfort:<br><br>-Overreliance on Heavy Paraprofessional Support<br><br>-Reducing Paraprofessional Support | |
| Broer et al., (2005)<br><br>United States of America | Perspectives of students with intellectual disabilities about their experiences with paraprofessional support. | To find out about service delivery issues to support settings to extend inclusive opportunities for young people with disabilities. It also hoped to develop a better understanding of the impact of paraprofessional support for young people with disabilities, compare priorities and concerns included in the professional literature | Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling approach. The researchers worked with two advocacy organisations to identify participants who could be contacted and invited to take part. | 16 young adult participants (aged 19-29 years of age), 6 female and 10 male, with 'intellectual disabilities', took part. All participants used language as their communication approach.<br><br>All had received TA support and received 'special education'.<br><br>All, with the exception of one who was still in education, had completed high school in the last 5 years. Participants who had finished school were chosen as to not | Semi-structured interviews exploring the participant's experiences and perspectives of paraprofessional support in the classroom. The researchers sent information about the research ahead of time to offer participants time to consider what would be involved.<br><br>Participants were asked some rapport building questions to start with and then asked about their experiences in school. Then they were asked about their perspectives about how the support they were given was. Finally, | Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. HyeprQual3 software was used to support the analysis.<br><br>Data was analysed inductively using categorical coding. 60 initial codes were identified.<br><br>Upon re-reading these codes were narrowed to 31. HyperQual was then used to sort the data into 31 code specific reports (all of the information that had been coded in each of the 31 codes was brought together). Inductive analysis | The reported overarching theme was the primacy and sometimes exclusivity of the relationships between the students and paraprofessionals. From this, four interrelated themes were identified:<br><br>- Mother<br>- Friend<br>- Protector from bullying<br>- Primary teacher<br><br>The paraprofessionals were viewed as the four categories named above. For example, in relation to 'friend' sometimes the paraprofessional was viewed as helpful and acted as company which filled a 'companionship void' if the young people did not feel they had friends that were peers. | 17 |

| | | | | compromise or impact relationships that the participants may have had and therefore, hopefully enable them to be honest in their reflections without worry of potential perceived consequences. | participants were asked what advice they would offer to school personnel to help improve or continue good practice.<br><br>The researchers state that they asked appropriate follow-up questions as the interviews were semi-structured and also stated that they changed the phrasing of the questions to meet the needs of the individual participants. | was then applied to support the researchers to identify the themes. | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Skär & Tamm (2010)<br><br>Sweden | My Assistant and I: disabled children's and adolescents' roles and relationships to their assistants | Yes, the aim was to describe how children and adolescents with restricted mobility perceive their assistant and focus on the roles and relationships they have towards one another, and how the presence of an assistant influences children and young people's peer contacts. | Convenience sampling approach was used. The participants had been involved in other research with the researcher. | 13 CYP partook in the research, they were between the ages of 8 and 19 years (mean = 13 years).<br><br>Participants had a diagnosis of spina bifida, muscular dystrophy and/or rheumatic illness. Due to their diagnosis they all used a form of mobility aid. | Data was collected through conversational interviews which were carried out by the first author. A semi-structured interview guide was used to guide the interviews. Interviews took approximately 45 minutes. | The interviews were recorded for verbatim transcription.<br><br>The researcher noted that the interviews were transcribed and read through by two different authors from the perspective of Grounded theory. The primary author carried out most of the analysis but had frequent discussions with | The findings were divided into five categories:<br>- The replaceable assistant<br>- The assistant as a mother/father<br>- The professional assistant<br>- The assistant as a friend<br>- My ideal assistant<br><br>These findings also connect to other research papers explored in this data extraction table (e.g., assistant as a parental/friend figure). | 19 |

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| | | | | | | another author. The researcher started with open coding then the question: 'How do the participants perceive their situation when they have an assistant?' was held in mind. the texts were then coded and annotated. Axial coding was then carried out and selective coding was used in the final step of the coding process. | | |
| Mortier et al., 2010 Belgium | Supports for children with disabilities in regular classroom: an account of different perspectives in Flanders. | Aimed to answer 'how and why' questions regarding inclusive education practice in a particular cultural education context. This was part of a three-year research effort to investigate facilitating factors and barriers to inclusive education in Flanders. | The paper does not state how the participants were recruited. Given that it is research into education within Flanders it is thought that a purposive sampling approach must have been taken. | Thirty children and their families' support persons and teachers were involved. Three children were involved as key case studies (they had extensive observations carried out by the researchers). 15 children were involved in the interviews. These were all female and aged: 6, 12 and 17. Two had 'cognitive' needs and the other individuals had | Observation and interviews with all people involved (adults and CYP). Notably, the interviews with the children are described as 'informal'. These interviews were carried out in different contexts (e.g., at home, school therapy centres etc). | Inductive analysis was used. Two of the main authors carried out line-by-line analysis of the transcripts of the focus group meetings to identify reoccurring themes. | The researchers identified that the children perceived TLSAs to help them with speed and accuracy of their schoolwork and that they experienced a sense of security from such support.<br><br>The CYP also highlighted that being independent was important for them. | 15 |

| | | | | communication and physical (motor) needs. | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bland & Sleightholme 2012

United Kingdom | Researching the pupil voice: what makes a good teaching assistant? | Aimed to find out, directly from children, what makes a good teaching assistant including the main personal and professional characteristics and the type of support they hoped for. | A primary school was used for this research. The research does not explain how/why this setting was chosen for the research. It is expected that a purposive sampling approach was taken. | 28 Year 5 and Year 6 pupils who were in the same class (mixed-year group). They were between 10 and 11 years of age.

26 children completed the questionnaire part of the research. | Children were given the opportunity to write written responses to the three key questions:

What makes a good TA.

Whether or not they find TAs useful to help them work to the best of their ability.

Whether they could confide in a TA.

They were also asked to complete a brief questionnaire comprised of 7 questions e.g., 'Do you find it easier to go to a TA to talk to or do your teacher, or both same?' | Children wrote responses and completed a questionnaire comprised of 7 questions. Researchers stated that the responses were 'scrutinised by grouping together sets of broadly similar TA characteristics'. There was not any additional detail on how the data was analysed. | Children hoped for a TA who had positive attributes e.g., 'caring' and have a 'good sense of humour'.

To not be 'really silly or strict; somewhere in the middle'.

It seemed that children hoped for adults who were thoughtful and understanding, responsible, fun and also demonstrated 'assertiveness'.

In relation to the questionnaire, it was found that first aid training and other training were important (however it is important to note that the researchers set this up as a job advert task so whether the children really knew the differences that qualifications could make is arguable due to their age and, therefore, possibly limited experience.

46% said they would be happy to talk to a TA or teacher. 8% said they would seek guidance of a teacher. It is important to keep in mind that children may have had different amounts of interactions with TAs or quality of relationships with each individual adult, respectively. | 11 |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Porrino et al., (2024)<br><br>UK | Teaching assistant support for learning and wellbeing: the perspectives of secondary school pupils with special educational needs and disabilities | Explore how secondary school students with SEND view the support that they receive from TLSAs with their learning and well-being. | Two waves of sampling. One involved the author contacting schools that they knew and wave two involved contacting schools that the author did not know. | 12 participants between 14-16 years of age, who all received 1:1 TLSAs support during teaching and learning time. All participants were all in mainstream secondary school settings in England. | One to one interviews were carried out with the CYP and lasted approximately 40 minutes.<br><br>The interviews were split into four sections: learning, independent learning, well-being and well-being independence. These each explored the strengths and areas for development of the support. | Inductive thematic analysis was used (this involved data analysis, data familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes and defining and naming themes). | The following six themes were identified:<br>- TA support benefits learning.<br>- Reduced opportunities for independence<br>- Quality of TA and student relationship is important to successfully work together<br>- TA support appears to benefit well-being.<br>- Individualised and person-centred TA support<br>- TA support linked to negative social impact | 19 |
| Webster & Blatchford (2018) | Making sense of 'teaching', 'support' and 'differentiation': the educational experiences of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans and Statements in mainstream secondary schools | The research aimed to provide descriptive information about the day-to-day experiences had by secondary-aged pupils who has 'high level' SEND. | The researchers accessed participants through local authority connections. Through these connections, 13-14-year-olds who were thought to be eligible were invited to take part. Children with learning challenges primarily | 49 pupils aged 13-14 years were involved in this research. Participants were identified as having 'high level' SEND. 82% of the participants had a primary SEN of cognition and learning. 18% had a different identified primary area of SEN. | Trainee educational psychologists carried out the data collection after receiving training. The researchers were each responsible for collating the information about an individual child (to be presented as a case study). Semi-structured interviews, amongst other data collection methods, were used. | Cases studies were formulated through observation and interviews by the researchers. These were then presented as case studies and analysed using both inductive and deductive thematic analysis approaches. | The results are presented as two inter-related themes: teaching and support and differentiation. The researchers explained that the case studies mentioned the TA support as central feature. In addition the theme of differentiation connected to how the children wo were in the case studies were treated differently to their peers who were not in receipt of an EHCP or additional support. | 19 |

| | | | related to cognition and learning were prioritised as this aligned with earlier research (which adopted a mixed methods research approach). | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

*Note.* Data extraction information gathered by the Research Assistants is available upon request

**Appendix H How the codes contributed to the descriptive and analytical themes**

| Descriptive theme | Codes feeding into the descriptive theme | Analytical Theme |
|---|---|---|
| TLSAs personal attributes and skills | <ul><li>Balanced</li><li>Relatable</li><li>Cool</li><li>Sporty</li><li>Respectable</li><li>Imaginative</li><li>Knowledgeable</li><li>Not gullible</li><li>Likes children</li><li>Good at listening</li><li>Approachable</li><li>Lovely</li><li>Adds sparkle</li><li>Calm</li><li>Encouraging</li><li>Caring</li><li>Patient</li><li>Smiley</li><li>Understanding</li><li>'Good' personality</li><li>Well-liked</li><li>Forgiving</li><li>Engaging</li><li>Experienced</li><li>Respectful</li></ul> | Children and young people desire to have a voice |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | • Knowledge<br>• Intelligence<br>• Pays attention to children<br>• Happy<br>• Fun<br>• Kind<br>• Friendly<br>• Attuned TLSAs<br>• Funny<br>• Supportive<br>• Helpful<br>• Nice | |
| Children and young people desire to have a voice and advocating for themselves | • Self-advocacy<br>• CYP wishing to have a voice over the support they receive<br>• Relatedness (age and gender) | |
| Led to social division and isolation from peers and the class teacher | • Negative impact on social connections with peers<br>• For disabilities<br>• Social isolation<br>• Negatively impacted the connections that the CYP had with their teacher | The weight of TLSA support |
| Negative experiences and challenges of TLSA support | • Negative emotional experiences<br>• Frustration with TLSA support<br>• Differences in approaches<br>• Support was perceived to lead to bullying<br>• Assigned to individual children<br>• Last person they'd seek help from<br>• Low effort needed<br>• Withdrawal from class was negative | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | • Under the microscope – being watched more than other CYP<br>• Impacted autonomy<br>• Negative impact on self-concept<br>• Feels like they are treated younger<br>• Desire for less support<br>• Less knowledge than may be needed<br>• Hindering independence | |
| A distinct yet unclear role | • Differences in the amount of time that they dedicate to the role compared to teachers<br>• Difference in physical presence to the teacher<br>• Adult hierarchy<br>• Financial differences<br>• Different perceptions<br>• Beliefs that the teacher was 'there first'<br>• TLSAs are 'in training' | TLSAs' positionality with school |
| School community support | • There to help everyone (including adults)<br>• Support the teacher | |
| Enables accessibility | • Enables accessibility<br>• Quick response<br>• Alternative environment | Classroom heroes |

| Supportive for academic learning | • Like teachers<br>• Supportive for learning<br>• TLSAs can offer more and quicker attention<br>• Note taking support<br>• Close proximity | |
|---|---|---|
| Supportive for children and young people's SEMH experience | • Supporting them to form and maintain social connections<br>• Supports CYP's social skills<br>• Main social contact in school<br>• Life skills<br>• Supporting inclusion<br>• Supportive for emotional regulation<br>• Positive experience<br>• Encouraging<br>• Supported focus<br>• Closer connection to the TLSA than the class teacher<br>• TLSA as a friend<br>• Someone to talk with | |

**Appendix I The papers contributing to the descriptive themes**

| Descriptive theme | Eyres et al., (2004) | Fraser & Meadows (2008) | Bland & Sleightholme (2012) | Bowers (1997) | Broer et al., (2005) | Egilson & Traustadottir (2009) | Groom & Rose (2005) | Ktenidis (2023) | Logan (2006) | Mortier et al., (2010) | Pinkard (2021) | Rutherford (2012) | Skär & Tamm (2010) | Tews & Lupart (2008) | Whitburn (2013) | Williams & O'Connor (2012) | Wren (2017) | Porrino et al., 2024 | Webster & Blatchford (2018) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| TLSA personal attributes and skills | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| Children and young people hoping to have a voice and advocating for themselves | N | N | N | N | Y | Y | N | Y | N | Y | N | N | Y | Y | Y | N | N | N | Y |
| Led to social division and isolation from peers and class teacher | Y | N | N | Y | Y | N | N | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | N | Y | N |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Toll on participants' experience of emotional well-being and sense of self | Y | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | N | Y | Y |
| A distinct yet unclear role | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | N | N | Y | N | N | N | Y | N | N | N | Y | N | Y | N |
| Enables accessibility | N | Y | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | N | Y | Y | N | | N |
| Supportive for academic learning | Y | Y | N | N | Y | N | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | N | N | N | N | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| Supportive for children and young people's SEMH experience | N | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | N | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | Y | Y |
| School community support | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | N | N | N | N | N | Y | N | N | N | N | Y | N | N | N |

*Note.* Y = yes, the paper did contain relevant accounts and therefore contributed to the descriptive theme, N = no the paper did not have relevant accounts that contributed to the descriptive theme.

## Appendix J The Workplace PERMA Profiler (Kern, 2014)

*Updated 13 October 2014 - MLK*

### The Workplace PERMA Profiler
### Margaret L. Kern, University of Pennsylvania

#### Measure Overview

In his 2011 book *Flourish*, Dr. Martin Seligman, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and founder of the field of positive psychology, defined 5 pillars of wellbeing, PERMA (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, accomplishment). We originally developed the PERMA-Profiler to measure these five pillars, along with negative emotion and health. This version was later created, which adjusts the questions to the workplace context.

#### P and N = Positive and Negative emotions

**Emotions** are an important part of our well-being. Emotions can range from very negative to very positive, and range from high arousal (e.g., excitement, explosive) to low arousal (e.g., calm, relaxed, sad). For **Positive emotion**, the PERMA-Profiler measures general tendencies toward feeling contentment and joy. For **Negative emotion**, the Profiler measures tendencies toward feeling, sad, anxious, and angry.

#### E = Engagement

**Engagement** refers to being absorbed, interested, and involved in one's work, and is a key measure for workplaces today. Very high levels of engagement are known as a state called "flow", in which you are so completely absorbed in an activity that you lose all sense of time.

#### R = Relationships

**Relationships** refer to feeling connected, supported, and valued by others in the organization. Having positive relationships with others is an important part of life feeling good and going well. Other people matter!

#### M = Meaning

**Meaning** refers to having a sense of purpose in one's work. Meaning provides a sense that your work matters.

#### A = Accomplishment

**Accomplishment** can be objective, marked by honors and awards received, but feelings of mastery and achievement is also important. The Profiler measures subjective feelings of accomplishment and staying on top of daily responsibilities. It involves working toward and reaching goals, and feeling able to complete tasks and daily responsibilities.

#### H = Health

Although not part of the PERMA model itself, physical health and vitality is another important part of well-being. The Profiler measures a subjective sense of health – feeling good and healthy each day.

#### Use of the Measure

Two versions of the measure are provided below: the first is for presenting the items one screen at a time, or as a full measure as part of a paper questionnaire; the second groups questions together with the same response scales, to reduce the number of pages needed. The questions should be presented in the order noted. The health and negative emotion questions act as filler questions and provide more information; for

briefness, the 16 PERMA questions (3 per PERMA domain plus a single overall question) could be used, but we recommend using the full measure.

The measure is **freely available for noncommercial research and assessment purposes, after registering** (please complete the form at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1eamBshwjtJyQDsWG72qum8Czi_J2IlZ3Q7r5FE5ojEA/viewform?usp=send_form). In the future, we will have an online portal for taking the measure and receiving results and insights, but at this point, we cannot provide assistance with administering or scoring the measure.

**For commercial purposes**, please contact the University of Pennsylvania Center for Technology Transfer

## Question Administration

The questions should be presented either with radial buttons or on a slider scale, with only the end points labeled. Note that this is an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 to 10.

| | Not at all 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | Completely 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| In general, to what extent do you feel contented? | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ |

## Scoring:

Scores are calculated as the average of the items comprising each factor:

| | |
|---|---|
| Positive Emotion: | P = mean(P1,P2,P3) |
| Engagement: | E = mean(E1,E2,E3) |
| Relationships: | R = mean(R1,R2,R3) |
| Meaning | M = mean(M1,M2,M3) |
| Accomplishment | A = mean(A1,A2,A3) |
| Overall Well-being | PERMA= mean(P1,P2,P3,E1,E2,E3, R1,R2,R3, M1,M2,M3, A1,A2,A3,happy) |
| Negative Emotion: | N = mean(N1,N2,N3) |
| Health = | H = mean(h1,h2,h3) |
| Loneliness | Lon (single item) |

## Sample Scoring Presentation

We are working on the best way to display scores. To date, we have used bar graphs:

| # | Question | Response Anchors | Label |
|---|----------|------------------|-------|
| 1 | To what extent is your work purposeful and meaningful? | 0 = not at all, 10 = completely | M1 |
| 2 | How often do you feel you are making progress towards accomplishing your work-related goals? | 0 = never, 10 = always | A1 |
| 3 | At work, how often do you become absorbed in what you are doing? | 0 = never, 10 = always | E1 |
| 4 | In general, how would you say your health is? | 0 = terrible, 10 = excellent | H1 |
| 5 | At work, how often do you feel joyful? | 0 = never, 10 = always | P1 |
| 6 | To what extent do you receive help and support from coworkers when you need it? | 0 = not at all, 10 = completely | R1 |
| 7 | At work, how often do you feel anxious | 0 = never, 10 = always | N1 |
| 8 | How often do you achieve the important work goals you have set for yourself? | 0 = never, 10 = always | A2 |
| 9 | In general, to what extent do you feel that what you do at work is valuable and worthwhile? | 0 = not at all, 10 = completely | M2 |
| 10 | At work, how often do you feel positive? | 0 = never, 10 = always | P2 |
| 11 | To what extent do you feel excited and interested in your work? | 0 = not at all, 10 = completely | E2 |
| 12 | How lonely do you feel at work? | 0 = not at all, 10 = completely | Lon |
| 13 | How satisfied are you with your current physical health? | 0 = not at all, 10 = completely | H2 |
| 14 | At work, how often do you feel angry? | 0 = never, 10 = always | N2 |
| 15 | To what extent do you feel appreciated by your coworkers? | 0 = not at all, 10 = completely | R2 |
| 16 | How often are you able to handle your work-related responsibilities?? | 0 = never, 10 = always | A3 |
| 17 | To what extent do you generally feel that you have a sense of direction in your work? | 0 = not at all, 10 = completely | M3 |
| 18 | Compared to others of your same age and sex, how is your health? | 0 = terrible, 10 = excellent | H3 |
| 19 | How satisfied are you with your professional relationships? | 0 = not at all, 10 = completely | R3 |
| 20 | At work, how often do you feel sad? | 0 = never, 10 = always | N3 |
| 21 | At work, how often do you lose track of time while doing something you enjoy? | 0 = never, 10 = always | E3 |
| 22 | At work, to what extent do you feel contented? | 0 = not at all, 10 = completely | P3 |
| 23 | Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are with your work? | 0 = not at all, 10 = completely | hap |

**Appendix K The questions asked in addition to the Workplace PERMA profiler in the National Survey**

Q2 Do you currently work as a Teaching Assistant (TA) or Learning Support Assistant (LSA) in a UK mainstream primary school?

○ No, I am not employed as a TA/LSA  (1)

○ Yes, I am employed as a Teaching Assistant (TA)  (2)

○ Yes, I am employed as a Learning Support Assistant (LSA)  (3)

*Skip To: End of Survey If Do you currently work as a Teaching Assistant (TA) or Learning Support Assistant (LSA) in a UK ma... = No, I am not employed as a TA/LSA*

Teaching and Learning Support in Statutory Education

Q3 Which region do you work in?

○    South East  (1)

○    London  (2)

○    South West  (3)

○    Midlands  (4)

○    East of England  (5)

○    Wales  (6)

○    North East  (7)

○    North West  (8)

○    Scotland  (9)

○    Northern Ireland  (10)

○    Other, please state:  (11)

_____

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Q5 What is the postcode of the school that you work in? (Please note, this will not be linked to your individual responses in the write-up/dissemination of the research)

○    Postcode:  (1) _____

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Q6 How would you identify the area that your school is located in?

○     An inner city  (1)

○     Outskirts of a city  (2)

○     Large town  (3)

○     Small town  (4)

○     Village  (5)

○     Other:  (6) _____

---

Q7 How would you identify the area that your school is located in?

○     Highly affluent  (1)

○     Moderately affluent  (2)

○     Middle class  (3)

○     Low income  (4)

○     Highly deprived  (5)

---

Q8 Do you work for:

○     A local-authority maintained primary school  (1)

○     An academy-maintained primary school  (2)

Q9 Do you work full-time or part-time?

○ Full-time (this is my only employment)  (1)

○ Full-time (I also work in another role too) (please detail what this other role is below)  (2) _____

○ Part-time (this is my only employment  (3)

○ Part-time (I also work in another role too) (please detail what this other role is below)  (4) _____

Q10 Are you mainly employed to support whole class teaching, 1:1 support or interventions?

○ I mainly support the whole class  (1)

○ I mainly support a child on a 1:1 basis  (2)

○ I mainly take children out of class and deliver targeted interventions for them  (3)

○ Other  (4) _____

Q11 Despite what you are mainly employed to do, what do you spend most of your working day doing?

○     I mainly support the whole class   (1)

○     I mainly support a child on a 1:1 basis   (2)

○     I mainly take children out of class and deliver targeted interventions   (3)

○     Other   (4) _____

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Q12 Do you have any additional responsibilities with your role?

○     I am an Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA)   (1)

○     I am a Therapeutic Active Listening Support Assistant (TALA)   (2)

○     I am a qualified first aider   (3)

○     Other   (4) _____

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Q13 During a typical day in your TA/LSA role, how much time do actually have for breaks (e.g., for lunch)?

○     Please specify the number of minutes you have on average:   (1)

_____

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Q14 How long have your worked in your current role?

○ Please specify years/months that you have been employed in your current post:
(1) _____

---

Q15 Have you been employed as a TA/LSA prior to this current role (e.g., employed in a different school)?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

---

Q16 To your knowledge, since you have been employed in your current role, have your school decreased the frequency of Social, Emotional and Mental Health related interventions offered to children (e.g., ELSA/Therapeutic StoryWriting) due to a lack of resources (e.g., staffing)?

○ Yes (1)

○ No (2)

○ Unsure (3)

---

Q17 To your knowledge, since you have been employed in your current role, have your school decreased the frequency of learning-related interventions (e.g., Precision Teaching/Paired Reading etc.) due to a lack of resources (e.g., staffing)?

○ Yes  (1)

○ No  (2)

○ Unsure  (3)

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Q18 To your knowledge, in the last 12 months, have TA/LSAs left their role at your school and not been replaced by a new member of staff?

○ Yes  (2)

○ No  (3)

○ Unsure  (4)

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Q19 Is your school currently advertising job positions for TA/LSAs?

○ Yes  (1)

○ No  (2)

○ Other  (3) _____

----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Teaching and Learning Support in Statutory Education

Q20 Which gender do you identify with?

○      Male  (1)

○      Female  (2)

○      Non-binary  (3)

○      Prefer to self-describe  (4)

_____

○      Prefer not to say  (5)

Q21 There are many definitions of 'well-being' in the research literature. This section of the questionnaire aims to explore your sense of well-being at work and beyond.  What does the term 'well-being' mean for you in your working life?

Q22- Q44 PERMA Workplace Profiler Questionnaire

Q45 Reflecting on your role as a TA/LSA, please answer the following 7 questions: Overall, how do your current role and responsibilities make you feel about work? (Is this feeling positive, negative or somewhere in-between?) Why and in what way? Please provide details to help us understand your answer...

Q46 What challenges, both in and outside of work, do you face in feeling good and functioning well within your role?

Q47 What steps, if any, has your workplace taken to support your well-being? Please consider this at a classroom, senior leadership and academy level (if appropriate). Please share what has been done and how this has impacted you to enable us to understand examples of good practice.

Q48 What, if any, changes could be made to improve your well-being as a TA/LSA?

Q49 What steps, both in and outside of work, have you taken to support your own well-being? What has helped/hindered in establishing these?

Q50 Are there any other steps/strategies that you plan to try in the future?

Q51 Is there anything you would like to add about other factors that impact your well-being and/or positive/negative experiences that have not been covered in this questionnaire?

Q52 Thank you for your contribution - your time is greatly appreciated.  If you would like to enter the prize draw, please click on the link below to be directed to a separate survey where you will be invited to provide your email address:

**Appendix L The Peer Support Group Session Format**

| Element of the session | Examples of practice |
| --- | --- |
| Check in | - Activity using resources that explore emotions/current experiences within the school setting or experience outside of work (depending on what feels comfortable for the individual group members). |
| Agenda setting | - Ask who has a topic they would like to discuss and (if appropriate) jointly problem solve. Note agenda items and calculate timings available for each. |
| Discussion of agenda items | - In turn, offer an opportunity for the discussion (and if appropriate, problem solving). |
| Reflections | - Time for reflections of the session, if appropriate, and hoped-for by the members of the group. |
| Check out activity | - Facilitate an activity (possibly using the resource utilised at the start of the session) to check in on how the group members feel following the session and/or identify something that they are looking forward to or feeling hopeful about.<br>- Re-share the date and time of the next group session. |

**Appendix M Qualitative questions asked of the Peer Support Group post-programme**

| | |
|---|---|
| Question 1 | Reflecting on the TA/LSA peer support group meetings, what was the experience like for you? |
| Question 2 | What aspects of the TA/LSA peer support groups do you think worked well? |
| Question 3 | What aspects of the TA/LSA peer support groups did not work well, or what would you change for future groups? |
| Question 4 | What did you value most about your experience in the TA/LSA peer support groups? |
| Question 5 | If a colleague asked about your experience with the TA/LSA peer support groups, what would you tell them? |
| Question 6 | How, if at all, have your relationships with colleagues (who were also part of the peer support groups) changed since being part of the pilot? |
| Question 7 | How, if at all, do you perceive the peer support groups have benefited other areas of your practice (e.g., when working with children, their families, or with colleagues who were not part of the peer support groups)? |
| Question 8 | If you feel that taking part in the pilot has changed the relationships that you have with colleagues or benefitted your practice (working with children or families), what do you think has helped to bring about this change and why? |
| Question 9 | Please summarise your thoughts about the TA/LSA peer support group experience in one sentence. |
| Question 10 | What advice would you give to other schools considering implementing TA/LSA peer support groups? (e.g., session frequency, group size, duration of sessions, who facilitates |

| | the groups, the number of attendees, what would be covered) |
|---|---|
| Question 11 | If peer support groups continue to be offered for TA/LSAs in schools, what do you think they should be named? <br><br> ☐ Peer Support Groups <br><br> ☐ Supervision Groups <br><br> ☐ TA/LSA Reflective Spaces <br><br> ☐ Other (please note your idea for the name):_____ <br><br> ☐ I do not have a preference |
| Question 12 | Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of taking part in the TA/LSA peer support groups? |

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Teaching and Learning Support in Statutory Education

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