# The perspectives and experiences of children with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream primary schools regarding their individual teaching assistant (TA) support

This paper reports a small-scale qualitative research project, carried out in the south of England. Ten children (aged ten-eleven) with a range of SEN, from mainstream primary schools, took part in individual semi-structured interviews about their TA support. Child-friendly interviews utilised toy props and a creative 'Ideal TA' activity to aid communication and engagement. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Participants' perspectives highlighted the ways in which their TAs had been deployed, which they perceived to enable helpful scaffolding of learning, but also caused a significant degree of separation from teachers. The nurturing characteristics of TAs were appreciated, and the positive impacts of TA support on pupils' social inclusion and emotional well-being were emphasised.

Keywords: teaching assistant; pupil voice; pupil perspectives

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## Introduction

### *TAs: developments*

The significant increase in the number of TAs employed within schools in England, over the past two decades, has been influenced by various factors, including the move to educate more children with SEN within mainstream (rather than special) schools, the introduction of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in 1998 to boost pupils' progress relative to international levels, and the National Agreement (DfES 2003) which promoted delegation of tasks from teachers to TAs. Between the years 2000 and 2018 the number of full-time equivalent TAs increased from 79,000 to 263,900 (DfE 2019).

The TA role has also undergone significant change. Whilst TAs once assisted the teacher in administrative tasks as an 'extra pair of hands' in the classroom (Groom and Rose 2005, 20) they have increasingly taken on 'greater responsibility for instructional decision-making' (Tews and Lupart 2008, 40). Lamb (2009, 29) reports that the teaching and support for pupils with SEN has largely 'been handed over to TAs' and Webster and Blatchford (2013) found that pupils with SEN are almost constantly accompanied by a TA. Researchers debate the appropriateness of this pedagogical role (e.g. Warhurst, Nickson, Commander and Gilbert 2014; Webster 2014) and highlight ethical issues around assigning TAs 'to students whose learning support requirements (through no fault of their own) often challenge teachers' (Rutherford 2011, 95).

The focus of Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs: statutory records of an individual pupil's SEN and required provision) on the weekly hours of TA support required, continues to reinforce one-to-one assignment of TAs to pupils with SEN. Webster and Blatchford (2019, 110) suggest that TAs should instead be 'part of a wider, more balanced and coherent set of responses to meeting the needs of pupils' with SEN. Whilst the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice clarifies that 'teachers are responsible and accountable for the progress and development of the pupils in their class, including where pupils access support from TAs' (DfE 2014, 99), a review of the deployment of TAs found that head-teachers were still 'aware and concerned that the responsibility for appropriately supporting and progressing their most vulnerable learners was often being given' to TAs (Skipp and Hopwood 2019, 8).

### *Impacts of TA support*

It was previously assumed that TA support must promote pupil progress. The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) study (Blatchford, Russell and

Webster 2012) contradicted this assumption, finding a negative relationship between the amount of TA support received and levels of pupil progress (across seven Year groups, three curriculum subjects and controlling for prior attainment and SEN status). Klassen (2001) found that pupils with specific learning difficulties who were assigned individual TA support during literacy lessons made less progress than those receiving no TA support. Muijs and Reynolds (2003) found that pupils receiving TA support during numeracy lessons made slightly less progress than those receiving no TA support.

When explaining the DISS project findings, Rubie-Davies, Blatchford, Webster, Koutsoubou and Bassett (2010) concluded that compared to teachers, TAs are more likely to focus on task completion (rather than advancing understanding), to ask closed questions, to give incorrect explanations and to provide prompts which give the answer. Researchers highlight that the impact of TA support is due to the 'decisions made about rather than by TAs' (Webster et al. 2010, 139) and can be linked to the five factors of the Wider Pedagogical Role model (Webster et al. 2011): 'practice' (e.g. TAs' explanations, demonstrations, questioning techniques), 'preparedness' (e.g. professional development opportunities, planning-sessions with teachers before lessons), 'deployment' (e.g. one-to-one working, small-group work, targeted interventions), 'TA characteristics' and 'conditions of employment'.

In a review of the TA literature, Alborz et al. (2009) highlighted a number of studies with more positive outcomes, usually where TAs delivered structured, targeted academic interventions (with adequate preparation and resources) rather than working one-to-one in the classroom. Qualitative studies have often found that 'key stakeholders perceive the presence of TAs in classrooms as contributing to improved outcomes' (Alborz et al. 2009, 30). Groom and Rose (2005) interviewed teachers, TAs, parents and pupils, finding an overwhelming view that TAs help pupils with SEN to manage lesson

tasks, and play a critical role in supporting their social, emotional and behavioural needs.

***Pupil voice***

'One of the simplest and most powerful steps we can all do more frequently is to listen to our students' voices in an effort to better understand their perspectives' (Giangreco 2021, 16). Even though children 'can reveal new issues about a setting that could go undetected' (Fitzgerald, Hobling and Kirk 2003, 124) and can offer 'intelligible and realistic ideas about TAs and their work' (Fraser and Meadows 2008, 359), there 'appears to be little research on whether pupils value working with TAs' (Bland and Sleightholme 2012, 173). In perspective-seeking studies, TAs (not pupils) are the most common participants (Alborz et al. 2009) and the voices of children with SEN are 'markedly absent from the literature' (Tews and Lupart 2008, 40).

When they are asked, pupils often report that TA support improves their approach to learning and access to tasks. Rose and Doveston's (2008) pupil interviewees expressed that they completed more work and were more engaged with education when supported by a TA. Fraser and Meadows (2008) found that pupils generally felt positive about being withdrawn from lessons to work with TAs.

Studies of pupil perspectives have also, however, confirmed the blurring of teacher-TA roles and the degree of separation between pupils and teachers. Pupils with SEN suggest that they spend more time with a TA than their teacher, learn more from them (Tews and Lupart 2008) and struggle to explain the difference between the two professionals (Eyres et al. 2004). Broer, Doyle and Giangreco (2005) interviewed young adults about the TA support that they had received in school, finding that many viewed the TA as their primary educator.

In relation to social outcomes, Broer et al's (2005) participants' discussions also reflected views of the TA as a mother and friend, suggesting a level of closeness and admiration but also interference with peer socialisation. Seeing the TA as a 'friend' was a positive factor for Fraser and Meadows' (2008, 354) participants; 'she feels like a friend…we don't feel embarrassed to go up to her' and Tews and Lupart (2008) found that pupils with SEN reported that TAs increased their opportunities to socialise with peers, supported friendships, boosted the peer group's empathy/understanding of their SEN, and helped pupils to follow rules during play.

Within pupil voice research, there is greatest consensus about the impact of TA support on pupils' emotional experiences (compared to other pupil outcomes); findings are overwhelmingly positive. Rose and Doveston (2008, 151) suggested that TAs can act as a 'safe haven' or a 'temporary container for the excessive anxiety' experienced by pupils. Pupils value nurturing qualities in TAs, including being calm, patient, caring (Fraser and Meadows 2008), kind, respectful and helpful (Bland and Sleightholme 2012). They suggest that TAs 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 and Rose 2005, 27).

***Purpose of current study***

'The prerogative of pupils, regardless of their need or ability, to be involved in decisions which affect their lives has been established' (Shevlin and Rose 2008, 425) and research has shown that pupils can provide important insights about their support (Fraser and Meadows 2008). The present study recognises the abilities and rights of children (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) to express their views and to be heard, and was designed to enable and empower them to do so. The research was designed to explore the question: what are the perspectives and

experiences of pupils with SEN in mainstream primary schools regarding their individual TA support?

## Methods

### *Design*

This paper reports a small-scale qualitative research project, which used child-friendly interviews, designed to gather rich examples of the lived experiences of children with SEN, in relation to their individual TA support.

### *Sample*

A purposive sample of ten children (aged ten-eleven) was recruited by the Educational Psychology Team within one Local Education Authority in the South of England (see Table 1 for participant details). Requests were sent to Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in local schools, to identify pupils who: were in the final year of primary school, had an EHCP (or Statement: the previous equivalent of an EHCP), and received at least 25 hours of TA support weekly. Participants' SEN included: Autism Spectrum Disorder, physical needs, social emotional and mental health needs, speech, language and communication needs, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning difficulties. Participants were recruited from eight primary schools spread across one city; in five of these schools, over 20% of pupils were eligible for free school meals (a measure of lower household income).

[Table 1 near here]

### *Instrument*

Individual semi-structured interviews lasted between eleven and 52 minutes (on average 32 minutes), with the duration depending on participants' level of detail given in their responses, and levels of comfort within the interview situation. Interviews were

recorded electronically. The interview schedule covered questions about many aspects of TA support, including: role, impacts, characteristics, examples of working together, comparisons with teachers. A participatory communication tool was included within the interviews, referred to as the Ideal TA activity. This was a modified version of the Ideal Self technique (Moran 2001). Participants were asked if they would like to draw or model (with modelling clay) their current and later their imagined ideal TA. Accompanying discussions prompted participants to think about what an ideal TA might be like, might do, and might say, and to make comparisons between their own TA and imagined ideal TA.

Inspiration was taken from the Mosaic Approach (Clarke and Moss 2001) which combines verbal interviewing with visual methods of gathering children's views, and suggests children are 'experts in their own lives' (Clarke and Moss 2005, 5). Eyres et al (2004, 150) report that drawing the adults in the classroom gives children a 'concrete starting point from which to elaborate' and Thomas and O'Kane (1998, 343) report that in their research, the 'use of these participatory techniques greatly assisted in breaking down imbalances of power' between adult (interviewer) and child (interviewee).

Toy props supported expectation-setting and rapport-building. Participants were invited to place a Lego Judge figurine facing away from them, to aid explanations that there were no right or wrong answers in the interview. A stop sign (from a Lego set) could be presented to the interviewer if participants wanted to stop the interview or skip a question. The use of props was guided by the person-centred planning work of Newton and Wilson (2011, 14) who claim that 'when we playfully talk about the serious subjects of judgement…we can create a safer climate'.

### *Procedures*

Approval was granted by the University of Southampton Ethics Committee. Data were collected in schools during the academic year 2015-2016. Interviews started with informal discussions to build rapport, and then the props were jovially explained. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality (with the exception of safeguarding issues).

The interviewer followed the interview schedule, adapting in-the-moment for individual pupils' needs, interests and engagement, and prompting for more information. Participants were given the choice of engaging with the drawing and modelling resources during the Ideal TA segment of the interviews.

### *Data Analysis*

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, following the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and using the computer software QSR N-Vivo 10. Thematic analysis provided a structured and transparent process of analysis and was suitable for the combination of visual and verbal data. During the coding phase, participants' spoken words/phrases, as well as key elements within their drawings/models were highlighted, and allocated a code, based on their interpreted meaning.

## Results

The thematic analysis process established five over-arching themes based on the data, each comprising a number of sub-themes (See Figure 1).

[Figure 1 near here]

### *Logistics of my TA support*

All participants highlighted the close proximity of the TA and the frequency of their support; Scott suggested that *'Miss X would already be by me so I'd ask her'*, and when

asked how much time they spent with their TA, Mariusz replied *'always'* and Thomas said *'lots'*. Becky talked about feeling frustrated that she was unable to work more independently: *'yeah I like to work by myself…I'm okay with that* (working with TA) *but sometimes I find it frustrating'*. However, seven participants (with a wide range of SEN) described examples of their TA encouraging independent work; Ben explained: *'she broke down the steps and showed me how to do it on the whiteboard. Then I could do it by myself,'* Scott said that: *'sometimes I can do it on my own and she lets me get on',* and Lauren described how *'sometimes they help me for a while and then when they feel like I've got the idea they'll go and help other people'.*

Suggestions of dependency on TA support arose in discussions about secondary school; Paul suggested that without a TA, secondary school *'would be so bad, I need that, I would rather get home-schooled'* and Mariusz felt he would *'never learn nothing'*. Eight participants identified that although the TA had a certain level of responsibility to prioritise their needs, they were also involved in other forms of support including small-group work, supporting other pupils in class, and helping the teacher. Participants suggested that working outside of the classroom helped them to learn things that they could then apply back in the classroom, but some comments seemed to suggest a feeling that being withdrawn was an automatic and inevitable response to their struggles; *'I was stuck and Miss had to take out me, Millie and Jake'* (Lauren).

***What is my TA like?***

Participants talked positively about their TAs' characteristics; seven considered them to already be ideal. When asked an open question about how they would describe their TAs, most responses related to the TA's nurturing nature, and their positive interactions. Amy reported that her TA was *'funny, chatty and kind'* and Paul stated *'they're funny…yeah they've got character'*. Participants' drawings and models of their TAs

also depicted kind and cheerful characters (see Figure 2). Lauren's model was smiling and waving, Amy's model was smiling, Paul's drawing was smiling and asking if he was okay, and Scott's model was labelled 'happy' and 'kind'.

[Figure 2 near here]

Joseph held a less positive view of his current TA, describing her as being *'pushy'* and *'mean'*; the examples he gave suggested a lack of patience and a failure to understand his needs, as well as an impact on his emotional well-being. He suggested that one way in which his TA could become closer to his ideal TA would be if she smiled more (see Figure 3). Other participants suggested that their TAs could sometimes be *'sad' 'bored'* '*tired'* and *'grumpy'*.

[Figure 3 near here]

Eight participants thought that their peers liked their TAs. Paul explained that *'my best friends they like her, they think she's funny and that she's a good character to have in the class'*, and Lauren suggested that her peers thought that the TA was *'nice'*. Teachers were perceived to think highly of TAs: Paul believed that the teachers *'like having their help and stuff'*, whilst Thomas described his TA as being *'supportive'* for the teacher. Ben commented that (without the TA): *'maybe she* (teacher) *could cope but it would be hard'*.

When asked to consider what their TA thought about them, participants said that the TA liked them, would use a variety of positive adjectives to describe them, felt proud when they had done well ('*and that makes me feel happy'* – Ben), and understood their difficulties. Their comments described positive, respectful relationships, apart from Joseph, who wondered if his TA preferred other pupils, and thought that he was *'rude'*, especially when he struggled to do something.

***Teacher versus TA comparisons***

When Toby was asked whether there were differences between his TA and his teacher, he replied *'no'*. Paul explained *'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'* and Mariusz stated *'she* (teacher) *doesn't even know all of my names'*. Amy explained: *'well, my teacher doesn't really come to me, like if I need help, but my TA comes to me whenever I need help'* and Mariusz highlighted that: *'teachers are like writing on the massive whiteboard … she doesn't help'*. Teachers were viewed as having greater knowledge/awareness of lesson content, and as being more highly skilled; Lauren commented *'I think they're different because … teacher knows what they're doing, feels confident about what we're learning… sometimes, they* (TAs) *don't know what they're doing'*. Ben highlighted that his TA would not always know the answer: *'say if I was stuck on such a hard question that even Miss X didn't know the answer'*.

***What is my ideal TA like?***

It was important for all participants (apart from Toby who was unable to respond on this topic) that the ideal TA was a nice person; they would be '*happy', 'smiling', 'kind', 'caring', 'sweet', 'friendly', 'funny' and 'encouraging'*. Ben was the only participant to also refer to academic skills; his ideal TA would be '*knowledgeable*'. Joseph explained that the ideal TA would '*help other people as well as me*', a view echoed by other participants. He also suggested that his imagined ideal TA (compared to his actual TA) would '*understand me more*'.

Participants' ideal TAs would say encouraging things and ask questions about the support they might need; *'keep going'* (Paul) and *'are you okay with this?'* (Joseph). For nine participants, the emotional support that their ideal TA would provide was emphasised. An ideal TA would help pupils to feel happy and to look forward to going to school. Lauren's ideal TA was described as being '*like a counsellor who helps…their*

*job is to help people with their problems'*, and Paul felt that an ideal TA should be a good listener and could lift his mood (See Figure 4).

[Figure 4 near here]

***What impact does my TA have for me?***

Eight participants thought that they would struggle in lessons without the TA providing academic support. Becky said *'sometimes she tells me to carry on, try to extend my sentences'* and Thomas (the only participant to have 'learning difficulties' as his primary SEN) suggested that the TA helped to clarify his thoughts: *'by helping with my thinking…sometimes my head feels really clogged up with ideas'*. For Ben, TA support appeared to be important for his access to tasks as well as his motivation, and he explained that without TA support he would be *'just thinking…about how I wouldn't even try at school since it would be too hard'*. Joseph recognised that academic support from a TA tended to mean greater separation from the teacher, highlighting that *'sometimes I'm relieved, like when Miss X goes somewhere else, cuz I get to spend a bit more time with other teachers'*.

Nine participants described the positive impact of TA support on their social inclusion and emotional well-being. Thomas' TA helped him to *'be kind'* and to *'make friends'*, Paul's TA helped him to become involved in games with peers at break times, and when Lauren had experienced difficulties with friends, her TA had supported reconciliations. Lauren also described how the TA helped her to feel a sense of belonging in school: *'like I'm meant to be here'*, Amy suggested that school would be *'not fun…and less laughtery'* without her TA, and Scott suggested that TA support helped him to feel *'happy! She's the only one that makes me happy'*. For Paul, the TA helped to soothe his anxiety, Lauren suggested *'she'll calm me down'*, and Ben explained that his TA helped him to use positive coping strategies (e.g. going to his safe

space) when he was feeling distressed. Even Toby, who had remained very quiet throughout the interview highlighted that *'I talk to him about stuff'*. Four participants (two with Autism, one with learning difficulties and one with ADHD) mentioned that the TA helped them to manage their behaviour, for example intervening to stop them swearing and shouting-out, and reflecting on challenging behaviour afterwards. For Joseph too, his TA and their interactions brought implications for his emotional well-being in school, only for him, these were negative: *'sometimes it's just a misery…sometimes I wish I could just go somewhere else'*. He had not spoken to anyone else in school about these experiences because he feared he would get into trouble.

TAs were described as providing physical support for those participants with such needs, including physiotherapy interventions, 'quiet times' where hearing aids could be taken out, and supporting movement and basic needs (e.g. eating).

**Discussion**

When provided with the opportunity to express their views, in a child-friendly interview scenario, participants generated insight and feedback about the support that they received from TAs. Participants discussed the logistics and nature of the TA role, the impacts of TA support (in particular for their academic, social and emotional development) and the ideal qualities and behaviours that a TA might demonstrate.

Participants' discussions often suggested they felt that TA support enabled them to access the curriculum, to persevere with tasks, and to make academic progress, as had been found in previous qualitative studies (e.g. Groom and Rose 2005; Tews and Lupart 2008). Pupil voice in this study echoed the positive opinions of TAs, teachers and parents reported in previous qualitative research (e.g. Farrell, Bolshaw and Polat 2000; Lacey 2001). Several participants appeared to describe the TA providing effective scaffolding for their learning, for example breaking tasks into smaller steps,

encouraging them to extend what they had written, and modelling and coaching before encouraging pupils to apply learned skills independently. Some pupils also suggested that TAs would check-in with them to see if they needed help, before automatically stepping-in. Their experiences possibly suggest some progress having been made since previous observational studies in schools where the practice of TAs was criticised (e.g. for limiting independence, for providing the answer without progressing understanding). However, the feeling that TAs were needed to make the work more accessible for pupils raises questions about how effectively and by whom the work had been set and differentiated originally. Additionally, of the eight participants who talked about the support they received with their learning, only one had 'learning difficulties' as their primary SEN reported on their EHCP, raising a question about whether their TA support was specifically targeted to their individual needs or had sometimes spread into other areas of support.

It seems likely that whilst pupils could describe in-the-moment examples of the TA helping them to engage with the work, this support does not necessarily translate into longer-term academic progress, when taking into consideration the findings of quantitative studies such as the DISS project. The perspectives and experiences of participants tended to complement current understandings of why this might be the case, relating to the Wider Pedagogical Role model (Webster et al. 2011).

There was a feeling amongst participants that because they struggled with the work within the classroom, the natural response would be for them to work one-to-one with the TA, separately from peers, often outside of the classroom. Whilst participants generally felt okay about this arrangement, they may not have known any different. The extent to which this strategy of TA deployment (one-to-one working and withdrawing pupils from class) seemed to be the norm, raises questions about whether these pupils

were able to feel that they had as much right to be in the classroom as everyone else (as suggested by Broer et al. 2005) and about other strategies that could have been implemented to support pupils with SEN more inclusively within the classroom. It has been argued that a more appropriate deployment of TAs would be as part of a more balanced and more individualised set of responses to pupils' needs (Webster and Blatchford 2019); expressing the provision section of EHCPs without stating a number of weekly TA hours, and instead adding more detail about specific targeted, and evidence-based strategies, would help to promote this. Evidence suggests that when TAs are trained and supported to deliver targeted, discrete academic interventions, (rather than working more frequently and ad-hoc, one-to-one) they are more likely to promote pupils' academic progress (Alborz et al. 2009). TA support is not always the most appropriate strategy of support for particular pupils, and schools ought to consider alternative solutions, such as supporting teachers to become more engaged and confident in teaching children with SEN, clarifying the teacher's role, and promoting natural support systems such as peers (Giangreco 2021).

Participants' discussions highlighted that they were frequently in close proximity to the TA, echoing previous research findings, both quantitative (Webster and Blatchford 2013) and qualitative (Tews and Lupart 2008). Whilst this was likely a helpful factor (for all but one participant) in fostering a positive and close relationship, the significant amount of time spent with a TA is perhaps why several participants believed that they wouldn't be able to manage without them. Participants' reflections in this area also highlighted a substantial degree of separation from the class teacher. Many participants felt that the TA knew them better than the teacher did, and several participants reported that the teacher didn't help them. TA support had become an alternative rather than an additional support, to teacher-led instruction/intervention.

Such findings relate to research which has suggested that TAs are taking on the main responsibility for pupils with SEN (Skipp and Hopwood 2019; Lamb 2009) and playing a largely pedagogical role (Giangreco, Suter and Doyle 2010). It seems that these strategies of TA deployment have been internalised by pupils, who can come to see the TA as their 'teacher' (*'she's my best teacher'* – Amy). The idea that the teacher teaches the class whilst the TA teaches pupils with SEN links to the view of a participant without SEN from the study of Fraser and Meadows (2008 355) who stated that *'I think those some people* (children with SEN) *would otherwise be dragging the rest of the class down so that the teacher can't give their full assistance to us'*. Handing over the responsibility for those pupils with the greatest level of need within the classroom to TAs has consistently been highlighted as unethical (Giangreco, Suter and Doyle 2010; Rutherford 2011), and a TA-led educational package 'would be considered unacceptable if suggested for students without disabilities' (Giangreco 2021, 6), but it appears that pupils as well as staff (Skipp and Hopwood 2019) continue to see this as the norm. A number of pupils in the study suggested that an ideal TA would play a wider role, also supporting other pupils, and the teacher. A more effective and ethical TA deployment would be to include regular portions of time where individual or small-groups of children with SEN work with the teacher, whilst the TA looks after the rest of the class.

Further comparisons between the teacher and TA helped to illuminate pupils' experiences of their support, and provide helpful indications about the practice and preparedness of TAs. Whilst some participants struggled to explain the difference between the two adults (as was found by Eyres et al. 2004), others indicated that the teacher might be more knowledgeable, be more likely to give correct explanations and to know the answers. One participant explained that the teacher rather than the TA

would ‘know what was going on’, possibly suggesting that TAs were ‘thinking on their feet’ with no previous information from the teacher. Despite participants often thinking that the teacher could be more likely to know the answers, they still suggested that the first and often only person that they would turn to for help was the TA. If TAs are to be able to bring positive academic impacts for pupils, then schools need to provide the appropriate training, support, and information prior to lessons.

One participant’s experiences of the TA coming across as mean and seeming to find him rude when he was struggling with the work, and other participants’ reports that their TAs could be irritable or grumpy, highlight instances of ineffective practice and difficult interactions, and potentially speak of the strains quite naturally placed on a relationship when two people spend such a lot of time together, and/or of the difficult working conditions for some TAs. These findings also emphasise the importance of pupils with SEN being given regular opportunities to feedback about the TA support that they are receiving (without feeling that they are doing something wrong) and to be included in decisions made about them (SEND Code of Practice; Convention on the Rights of the Child).

When asked to consider what their TA was like, participants overwhelmingly showed great admiration towards them; most participants stated that their TA was already ideal. Their descriptions generally focused on positive and nurturing personality traits and characteristics, including being kind, humorous, chatty and cheerful. Such findings are in-line with previous qualitative studies (Fraser and Meadows 2008; Bland and Sleightholme 2012) and suggest that an emphasis should be placed on these TA characteristics when recruiting and training TAs, and that a good level of consideration should be given to the likelihood of a positive, friendly relationship being formed when a particular TA is working with a particular pupil. A further implication is that TAs

should feel supported within their workplace to be able to maintain such cheery and enthusiastic personas.

A particularly strong theme within the interviews was the social-emotional support that TAs provided (both current and ideal TAs). By facilitating positive interactions with peers, supporting group work, providing prompts about social-rules, and supporting pupils to problem-solve in social scenarios, TAs helped participants to feel more included within their peer group. Participants' friends were perceived to think highly of TAs, admiring their sociable and fun qualities, suggesting that within the social environment of the school, TAs were providing good modelling of social skills for the pupils they supported. In discussions about their relationships with TAs, participants' comments indicated that TAs got to know pupils well, showed an understanding of their needs, and advocated for them. A significant message in relation to social outcomes was that TA support fostered a sense of belonging for pupils within school (*'she makes me feel like I'm meant to be here'*). In this way, TAs appear to support greater inclusion of pupils with SEN within mainstream settings, in-line with previous suggestions (Saddler 2013). The magnitude of this is clear; when pupils feel a greater connection with others in school, they are more engaged (Vollet, Kindermann and Skinner 2017) and demonstrate greater academic performance (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodick, Hattie and Waters 2016).

In a review of the literature in 2009, Alborz et al concluded that more information was needed about the impacts of TA support on pupils' emotional outcomes. In the current study, emotional support was appreciated and emphasised by all but one participant, and certainly was not limited to the one participant who had social, emotional and mental health needs. Participants talked about the TA making them feel happy (*'she's the only one who makes me happy'*) and they often saw their

TA as the person they could talk to about their worries and problems, the person who would listen non-judgementally, and the one who could promote emotional coping strategies in the heat-of-the-moment. Discussions about participants' ideal TAs suggested that there is great potential for them to provide a 'counselling' role. This echoes previous pupil-voice research, in that TAs appear to be very effective supporters of children's emotional well-being (Woolfson and Truswell 2005; Groom and Rose 2005). Positive findings regarding pupils' social and emotional outcomes adds to quantitative research, which has largely focused on academic outcomes or emotional factors relating to learning i.e. motivation (e.g. Blatchford, Russell and Webster 2012; Muijs and Reynolds 2003). Perhaps quantitative measures of social inclusion and emotional wellbeing (e.g. observable behavioural indicators, or teacher-ratings) would not gain such accurate and insightful information as seeking participants' own views in this way.

With participants suggesting the significant social-emotional benefits of TA support, schools ought to acknowledge this aspect of the TA role more clearly, and take action to provide TAs with the skills, resources and targets to maximise this impact. By supporting some of the most vulnerable pupils to feel happy, calm and as if they truly belong within their mainstream school, TAs play a significant role in making these schools a more inclusive place.

**Conclusion**

The child-friendly interview methodology of the study, including the creative activity and toy props, helped to encourage participants' engagement, to support their communication, and to build rapport and break down power imbalances between interviewer and interviewee. The flexible semi-structured interview schedule meant that the interviewer had opportunities to follow participants' leads and tangents, allowing

them to talk about the issues that were most important/relevant to them. Participants were purposefully the sole interviewees, so that their perspectives and insights were not overshadowed by other stakeholders. However, the lack of triangulation could also be considered a limitation of the study, and gathering the perspectives of teachers, TAs and parents, as well as conducting observations of participants working with their TAs, could have contributed more detail and reliability. A further consideration with regards to limitations is that the SENCOs who responded to the request for participants might have felt more confident about TA practice in their schools, compared with those many SENCOs across the city who did not respond. Future research could extend current findings using a larger sample, more diverse in age, and might seek to look for possible trends amongst pupils with particular types of SEN.

In summary, primary school children with SEN provided insightful and important feedback about the support that they receive from TAs. They felt that TAs supported them to access the curriculum, but also highlighted important issues around separation from the teacher, and about TA practice when they are allocated to work largely one-to-one, having to make pedagogical decisions on-the-spot. Participants' perspectives highlighted a wider impact of TA support than is sometimes recognised, researched and celebrated, by strongly emphasising the power of the TA in promoting pupils' social inclusion and emotional well-being.

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Table 1. Participant Information.

| Participant (names have been changed) | Primary SEN |
|---|---|
| Scott | Autism Spectrum Disorder |
| Paul | Physical Disabilities |
| Toby | Social Emotional & Mental Health needs |
| Amy | Hearing Impairment |
| Mariusz | Speech Language and Communication Needs |
| Ben | Autism Spectrum Disorder |
| Thomas | Learning Difficulties |
| Joseph | Physical Disabilities |
| Lauren | Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder |
| Becky | Hearing Impairment & Autism Spectrum Disorder |

Figure 1. Thematic Map.

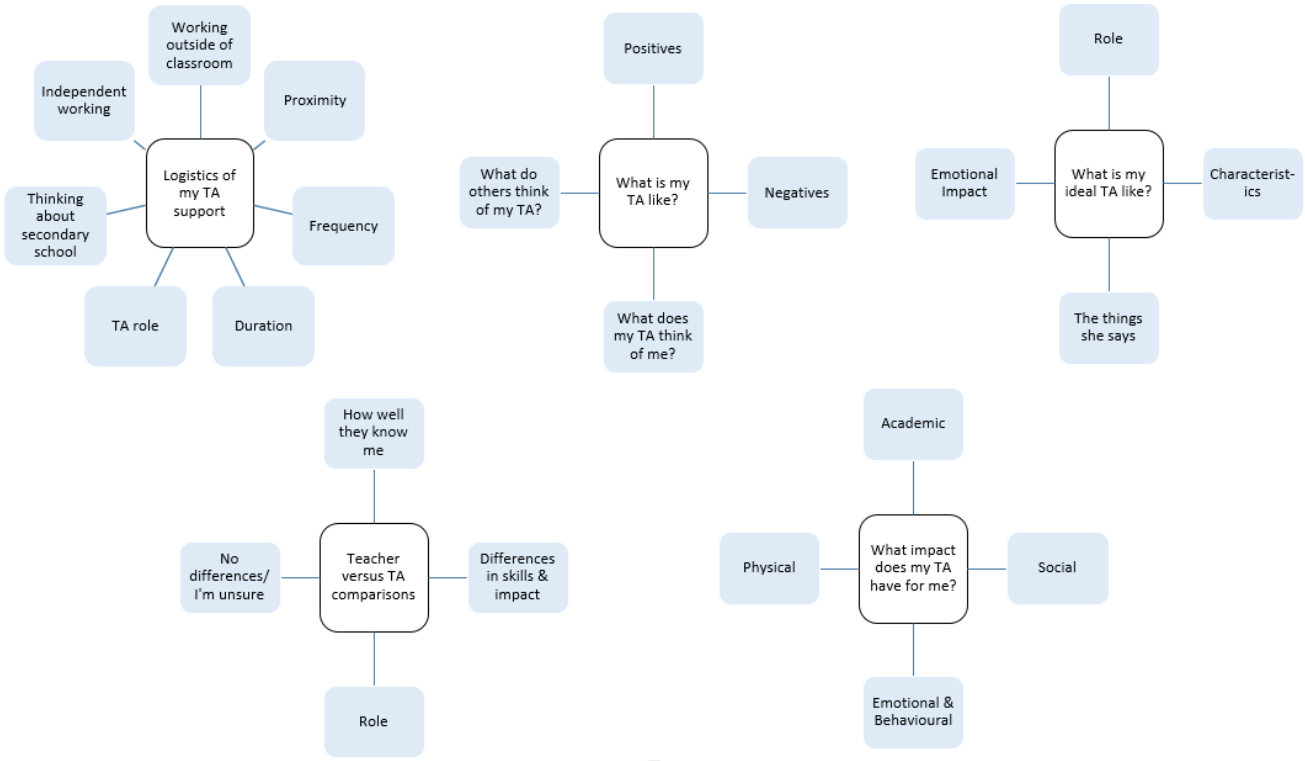

Figure 2. Photographs of Lauren's, Amy's, Paul's and Scott's (left-to-right) models and drawings of their current TAs.

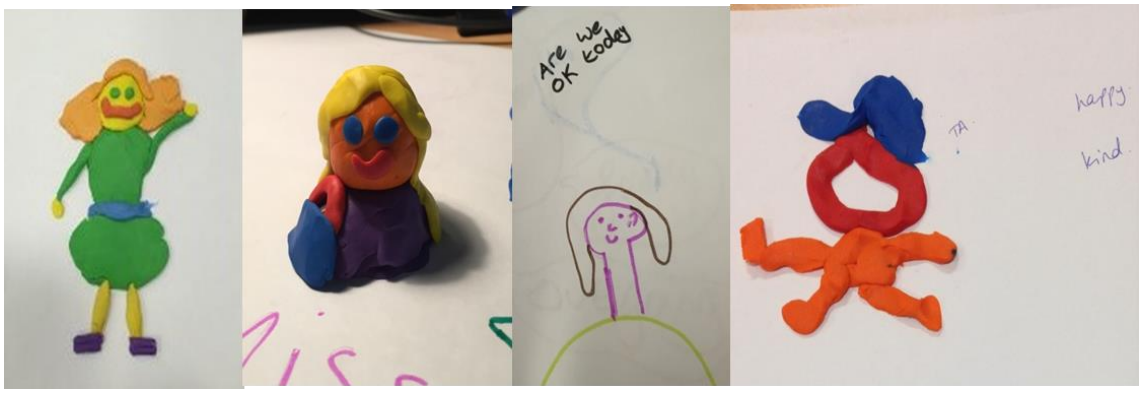

Figure 3. Photographs of models of Joseph's current TA (left model) who is not smiling and his ideal TA who is smiling.

Figure 4: Photograph of Paul's drawing of his ideal TA.