

**Defining the role of teaching assistants in inclusive education:  
a systematic review of TA role definition in England's primary schools**

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## **Abstract**

Inclusive education aims to ensure access to quality education for all students. Teaching assistants (TAs) play an important role in achieving this goal. The aim of this study is to explore how the roles of TAs are defined in English primary schools. This was done with a systematic literature review, guided by the PRISMA 2020 standards. Nine qualitative studies published between 2015 and 2025 were included. These studies show the TA role to be unclear and changing, with responsibilities often shaped by school needs and personal interpretation rather than formal policy. In addition to behavioural and emotional support, TAs also increasingly took on instructional roles, sometimes without proper training or recognition. The COVID-19 recovery period amplified this, with TAs getting more responsibilities and even taking on specialist roles. An unexpected finding was that even within the same classroom, pupils and TAs had different perceptions of the TA role. This review concludes that the reactive and flexible nature of the TA role hinders their potential contribution to inclusive education. This study is limited by a relatively small number of (qualitative) studies, overlapping datasets and a focus on TA's perspectives. This review implies that role definitions should be standardized and aligned with the goals of inclusive education. Training should match the responsibilities TAs are given, and TA-teacher communication should be improved for role clarity. In more general terms, to fulfil the goals of inclusive education, research should look beyond TAs and into what the system as a whole needs.

**Keywords:** *Inclusive education, teaching assistants, role definition, English primary schools*

## **Introduction and Theoretical Background**

### **Inclusive education**

Definitions of inclusive education vary across education systems, but the most common element defining inclusive education is ensuring access to education for all students (Varsik, 2022). Inclusive education can be viewed as an ongoing process to find better ways of responding to diversity. It involves identifying and removing barriers to learning, ensuring all students, especially those at risk of marginalization, are included, so they can participate fully and achieve positive outcomes (Ainscow, 2020).

An important principle of inclusive education is that diversity is not a problem but a resource that can benefit learning for all students (Florian & Spratt, 2013). This perspective challenges traditional approaches, which classify students by ability and provide extra support only to those considered ‘in need’, thereby reinforcing exclusion. Florian and Spratt (2013) advocate for an approach that broadens access to learning opportunities for all students, rather than isolating those with additional needs. This aligns with Booth and Ainscow’s (2002) Index for Inclusion, which emphasizes that inclusive education requires systemic changes in culture, policy and pedagogy and is not just about physical placement.

The global policy framework for inclusive education has been influenced by several key international agreements advocating for the right of every child to access education within mainstream schools, regardless of their special educational needs. A key agreement, The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), recognized inclusive education as a fundamental right. This principle was further reinforced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), particularly in Article 24, which states that individuals with disabilities should not be excluded from the general education system due to their disabilities (United Nations, 2006). This idea has also been adopted in the 17 goals of sustainable development as the fourth goal: ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (United Nations, n.d.)

### **Teaching assistants in inclusive education**

Teaching assistants (TAs) play a crucial role in promoting inclusive practices within education (Bennett et al. 2021). However, there is uncertainty about their role and deployment.

While it seems that TAs' roles have changed from being primarily supportive to a more instructional focus, there is little clear direction concerning what skills and duties TAs should have, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities are needed (Chambers, 2015).

TAs typically view themselves as supportive, standing by the students, mainly in social situations (Paju et al., 2021). Research does suggest that TAs practice a variety of non-instructional roles, such as administrative roles, first aid duties and physical and social support for students (Harris & Aprile, 2015). However, research also suggests that TAs are increasingly taking on instructional roles (Sharma & Salend, 2016; Webster & Blatchford, 2014). Sharma and Salend (2016) found that, beyond supporting teacher-directed instruction and carrying out various non-instructional tasks, TAs are also taking on key roles in instruction, classroom management and socialization, and making important curricular decisions for students with disabilities. The enactment of TAs can be seen as a 'jack of all trades' model, in which TAs are being expected to undertake roles for which they have not been properly trained or supported, according to Harris and Aprile (2015).

Recent research on TAs reports mixed findings regarding whether TAs have a positive or negative impact on students in inclusive classrooms. Across multiple studies, TAs are recognized for their ability to provide individualized support, specifically to students with disabilities (Sharma & Salend, 2016; Bennett et al., 2021). This can lead to increased participation of students in instructional activities, leading to better social integration and reduced off-task behaviours (Sharma & Salend, 2016). Additionally, in some cases, TAs can lighten teacher stress and workload, which allows the teachers to focus on their instructional tasks (Harris & Aprile, 2015). TAs can also play a role in classroom management and behaviour regulation, creating a more effective learning environment (Harris & Aprile, 2015).

Despite these benefits, research also suggests that TAs can have negative effects on students. A common concern is over-reliance on TAs, leading to students having less interaction with teachers or their peers (Webster & Blatchford, 2014; Paju et al., 2021). This can even lead to social isolation of students with disabilities. Instead of stimulating inclusion, the constant presence of a TA can separate students from their peers, limiting social interactions (Webster & Blatchford, 2014; Giangreco, 2021). This phenomenon, which Giangreco (2021) refers to as "an island in the mainstream", suggests that TAs should not form a replacement for students interacting with their peers and teacher involvement. Research also suggests that the deployment

of TAs doesn't always result in improved academic outcomes. Webster and Blatchford (2014) found that students who received the most TA support made less academic progress than their peers who received little or no support from TAs. Chambers (2015) expressed similar concerns, noting that TAs performing instructional tasks may negatively impact academic outcomes when their support replaces qualified teacher instruction. Giangreco (2021) further supports this point, arguing that when TAs assume instructional responsibilities rather than supporting teacher-led instruction, it can lead to compromised academic quality and reinforce inequities.

Another important issue is the lack of standardized training and role clarity. A lot of TAs enter the profession with no specialized training in instructional strategies, which can lead to inconsistent support that doesn't align with optimal teaching practices (Sharma & Salend, 2016; Bennett et al., 2021).

While TAs can have a positive impact on inclusive classrooms and can contribute in effective ways, their effectiveness is often hindered by insufficient training and unclear roles; therefore a more careful look at what TAs are expected to do within their working environment is needed, to clearly define their roles and responsibilities (Sharma & Salend 2016; Harris & Aprile 2015).

### **A critical look at research regarding TAs**

Giangreco (2021) states that much of the research on TAs' roles, training and supervision just repeats findings rather than offering new insights. In other words, the literature is strongly focused on improving the clarification of the roles, the training and the supervision of TAs as an answer to the optimization of inclusive education. While these core issues remain important, according to the author, framing of the research in ways that put these issues in a fuller context should be a logical step. This is especially important in view of the established drawbacks of TAs.

### **Inclusive education and teaching assistants in England**

Inclusive education in England has been shaped by a number of national policy documents over the past few decades. The Green Paper *Excellence for All Children* (Department for Education and Employment, 1997) was an important step, promoting the idea that children with special education needs should be included in mainstream schools when possible. This laid

the foundation for later reforms, such as the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (Department for Education and Skills, 2001). Most recently, inclusive education in England has been mandated by the SEND Code of Practice in 2015. It mandates that children with special educational needs must be educated in mainstream settings, except in specific circumstances (Department for Education, 2015). Consequently, the growth of support for inclusive education is accompanied by a growing number of TAs in England. The number of TAs in the school workforce in England has increased almost every year since 2011/12, from 221,500 to 282,900 in 2023/24, an increase of 28% (Department for Education, 2024).

An earlier national study by Farrell et al., (1999) already showed big concerns about the unclear roles, insufficient training and inconsistent deployment of learning support assistants (LSAs) in English schools. The study found that LSAs were carrying out complex instructional and behavioural support tasks, often without formal job descriptions or training. This lack of structure seemed to reduce their potential contribution to inclusive classrooms. Bach et al (2006) examined how national workforce reform policies in the early 2000s further changed the nature of TA work in English primary schools. Their study found that TAs were increasingly asked to help with classroom learning, including teaching reading, managing behaviour and sometimes covering full lessons. However, there was little guidance or consistency in how these responsibilities were explained or supported. The role boundaries of TAs became blurred, and local schools often shaped TA responsibilities based on their specific needs rather than national policy. The authors argued that without clearer role definitions and support structures, TAs risked being overused while being undervalued.

The DISS (Deployment and Impact of Support Staff) study, conducted by Blatchford et al. (2009), took a closer look at the impact of TAs in England. The study highlights the important role of support staff in education, but also points out issues with their deployment and effectiveness. It found that pupils who received the most TA support often made less academic progress than their peers. It emphasized the need for a clear understanding of support staff roles to ensure the additional support by TAs leads to positive outcomes for the inclusive classrooms.

The findings of the DISS study led to widespread concern about the way TAs were being used in schools. In response to this, the Education Endowment Foundation published a national guidance report, *Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants* (Sharples et al., 2015), which gave practical recommendations based on research evidence. This report emphasized that many TAs

were being used as informal teaching substitutes for low-attaining pupils, often without training, structured interventions or time to work together with teachers. It called for a change in how TAs are deployed, urging schools to define their roles more clearly and make sure their work supplements the role of the teacher, rather than to replace it.

The COVID-19 pandemic expanded the responsibilities of TAs in England, specifically in delivering one-to-one group instruction as part of “catch-up” strategies (Webster & De Boer, 2021). While this helped address the learning losses caused by COVID-19, it continued the trend of giving TAs instructional roles without proper training and formal recognition.

A recent systematic review on TAs in England summarised the findings of research conducted in the 10 years after the DISS study (Lewis, 2025). This review found that TAs typically fall into three roles (support, repair and heuristic), as part of a scaffolding model for inclusive education (Radford et al., 2015; Bowles et al., 2018, as cited in Lewis, 2025). The support role focuses on helping students with tasks and behaviour, the repair role helps correct misunderstandings and the heuristic role stimulates independent thinking (Bowles et al., 2018, as cited in Lewis, 2025). Despite these findings, TAs in England frequently express a lack of role clarity, and often feel underutilized and excluded from important decision-making (Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014, as cited in Lewis, 2025). Additionally, it seems workforce restructuring has led to TAs taking on more whole-class teaching responsibilities, often without enough training or professional recognition. This raises concerns about role dilution and the long-term impact on teaching quality (Hammersley-Fletcher & Lowe, 2011, as cited in Lewis, 2025).

## **Current study**

TAs have become increasingly central to inclusive education in England’s primary schools, particularly since the implementation of the SEND Code of Practice (2015). Despite this, roles remain loosely defined, with big variations in their tasks, collaboration with teachers and impact on student learning. Given that the SEND Code of Practice (2015) has been in place for a decade, it is worthwhile to systematically examine how TAs’ roles have been defined since then. This systematic review addresses the research question: *how are teaching assistants’ roles defined in England’s primary schools?* By focusing on primary schools, this review provides an analysis of how TA roles function in early education settings. The SEND Code of Practice



(2015) states that primary schools play a foundational role in implementing SEND inclusion strategies, and that teaching assistants are an important component in this process. (Department for Education, 2015). Additionally, according to the School Workforce in England Report (2024), the number of TAs employed in primary schools is significantly higher than in secondary schools.

## **Methods**

### **Design**

This study used a systematic review design, guided by the PRISMA 2020 reporting standards (Page et al., 2021). Snyder (2019) describes a systematic review as a structured method for identifying, evaluating and analyzing relevant research. Its purpose is to gather all empirical evidence that meets the predefined criteria in order to answer a research question or hypothesis. The advantages of a systematic review in comparison to other types of reviews (for example, a narrative review) are its comprehensiveness, its decreased risk of bias and its more explicit use of methods (Charles Sturt University, n.d.). This approach was chosen to systematically review peer-reviewed research on the roles of teaching assistants in England's primary schools. The primary aim of this systematic review is to identify, appraise and synthesize empirical evidence that meets pre-specified eligibility criteria. The research question guiding this review is:

*How are teaching assistants' roles defined in England's primary schools?*

### **Search strategy and selection criteria**

The search process was structured in alignment with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure transparency (Page et al., 2021). The search was conducted on March 10, 2025. Searches of the ERIC, PsychINFO and Web of Science databases were conducted to identify relevant peer-reviewed empirical studies published in English from 2015 (start of implementation SEND Code of Practice) to 2025.

The following search terms were applied using Boolean operators:  
("teaching assistant" OR "paraprofessional" OR "classroom assistant" OR "learning support assistant" OR "teacher aide" OR "classroom aide" OR "support staff" OR "educational assistant" OR "paraeducator" OR "inclusion support assistant")

AND (“role definition” OR “role enactment” OR “role perception” OR “role implementation” OR “responsibilities” OR “job description” OR “deployment” OR “practical application” OR “role clarity” OR “role mismatch” OR “role discrepancy”)

AND (“inclusive education” OR “inclusive classrooms” OR “mainstream education” OR “regular education” OR “inclusive education policy” OR “legislation inclusive education” OR “barriers to implementation” OR “challenges” OR “gaps in implementation” OR “practical challenges”)

AND (“United Kingdom” OR “England” OR “English primary schools”)

Filters on the databases were used during the search. These filters included: ‘peer-reviewed articles’, ‘English language’ and ‘publication years: 2015-2025’.

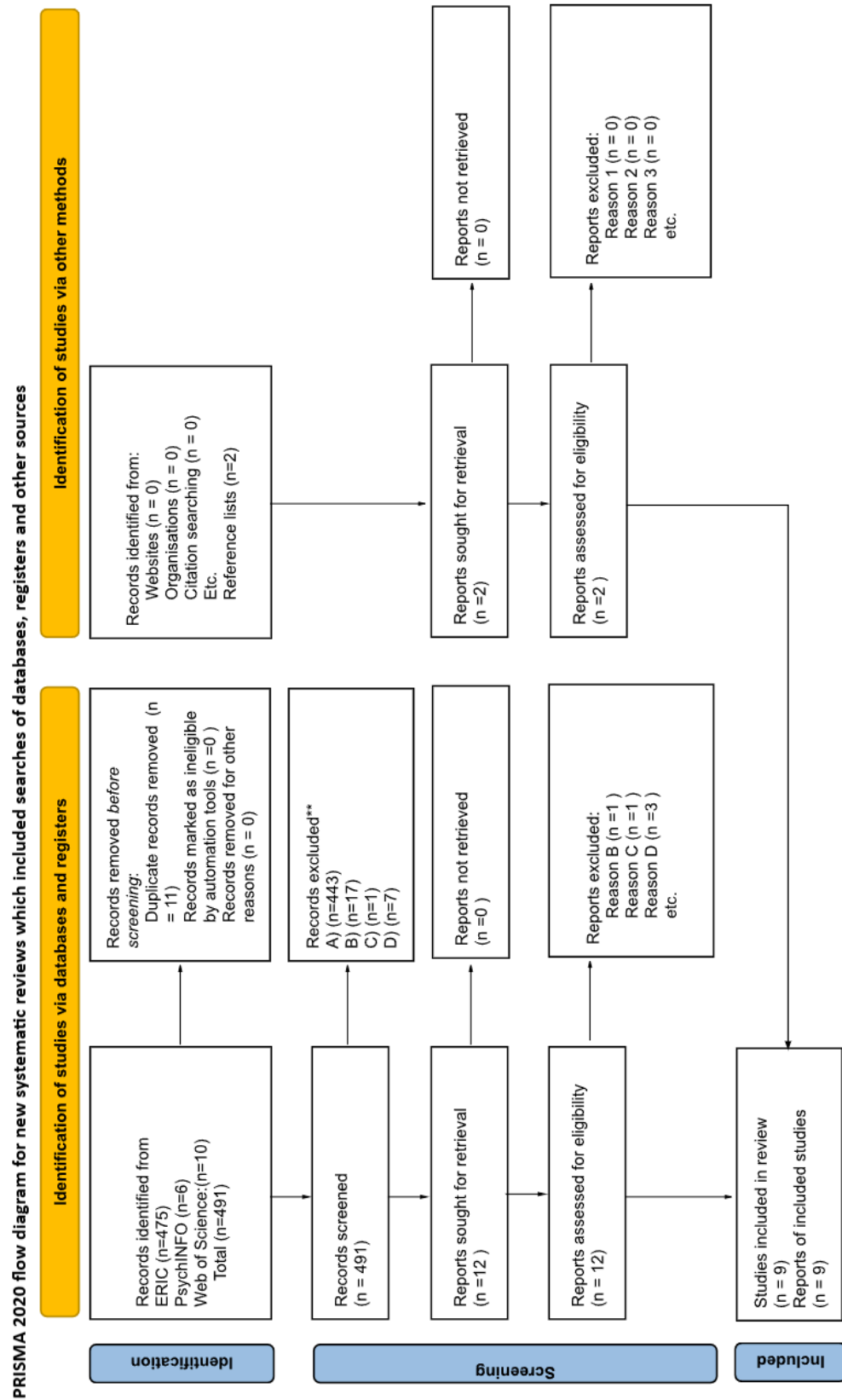
Of all the identified studies, the titles and abstracts were examined to determine whether they were likely to meet the inclusion criteria in the review and warranted further examination. Studies were included if they: (a) focused on teaching assistants in the context of primary schools within England; (b) addressed issues related to (1) the definition or perceptions of teaching assistants’ roles; (2) teaching assistants’ contributions to inclusive practices, including their interactions with teachers or students with special educational needs; (3) the role of teaching assistants in promoting an inclusive classroom environment; (c) were based on empirical research, including quantitative studies, qualitative studies or mixed-methods research; (d) were published in or after 2015; (e) were published in English; (f) consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles or studies. Studies were excluded if they were: (a) unrelated to teaching assistants or inclusive education; (b) addressing teacher assistants but not their roles, responsibilities, perceptions and implementations; (c) focusing on teaching assistants in non-inclusive settings; (d) not focused on English primary schools; (e) published in languages other than English; (f) non-peer-reviewed and non-academic.

## **Selection procedure**

For the selection process, this study followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to ensure a transparent and reproducible process (Page et al., 2021). The selection procedure was conducted by the author. Using the search strategy, a total of 491 studies were identified from the databases: ERIC (n=475), PsychINFO (n=6), Web of Science (n=10). All retrieved studies were imported into EndNote (EndNote, 2025), where 11 duplicates were removed. Remaining studies were

manually verified to ensure accuracy. The titles and abstracts of the remaining studies were screened based on the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. From this screening process, 443 studies were unrelated to TAs or inclusive education, 17 studies were not focused on roles or responsibilities, one study was not focused on inclusive settings, seven studies were not focused on English primary schools, leaving 12 studies for assessment. These 12 studies were reviewed based on the exclusion/inclusion criteria set for this study. After the review, one study was excluded because it was not focused on TAs roles and responsibilities, one study was excluded because it focused on non-inclusive settings and three studies were excluded for not being focused on English primary schools, resulting in seven studies remaining. A reference list search of the studies was done to identify relevant studies that fit the inclusion criteria that did not appear in the online search of the databases. two studies were identified this way that met the inclusion criteria, making the total number of studies for this review nine. A detailed overview of this process is illustrated in Figure 1 (PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the study selection process).

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the study selection process



Exclusion reasons: A) unrelated to TAs, B) addressing TAs but not their roles, responsibilities, perceptions and implementations C) Focusing on TAs in non-inclusive settings D) not focused on English Primary schools.

Source: Page MJ, et al. BMJ 2021;372:n71. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n71.

## **Data extraction and synthesis**

Study quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), which is designed to evaluate different types of research (Hong et al., 2018). The author independently assessed all included studies using the MMAT. As all the studies in the review were qualitative, five specific criteria were used: (1) whether the study design matched the research question, (2) whether the data collection methods were suitable, (3) whether the findings were clearly based on the data, (4) whether the interpretations were well supported by evidence, and (5) whether there was a consistent link between the data collection, analysis and interpretation. All studies passed the initial screening questions and then met all five quality criteria.

For example, Johnson's (2017) study, which looked at TAs delivering a literacy intervention, used interviews and observations, across six primary schools. Since the study focused on people's experiences and role perceptions, a qualitative approach was appropriate (1). It used adequate qualitative data collection methods, such as semi-structured interviews and observations, to address the research question (2). The findings were supported by quotes, observations and cross-case comparisons (3). The interpretation of the results was linked to multiple themes, with examples (4). Lastly, there was a consistent link between the qualitative data, sources, collection, analysis and interpretation (5).

A table of the selected studies was made using Google Sheets to systematically collect relevant study information. It included the author(s)/year, research aim, research methods and key findings of each study.

Four of the studies included in this review (Clarke 2019; Clarke & Visser 2019a; Clarke & Visser 2019b; Geeson & Clarke, 2023) are based on the same or overlapping datasets. Most of these come from Clarke's doctoral research, which is used in different ways across the studies. One of the studies (Geeson & Clarke, 2023) combines this data from a separate project. While there is some repetition in terms of participants, each paper explores different aspects of the TA role, like identity, gender or behaviour management. Because of these different angles and contributions, all four were included in this review.

A narrative synthesis was performed to identify patterns and themes in TAs' roles across studies. This method was chosen because all studies included in the review were qualitative. Findings were synthesized thematically, grouping studies based on TA roles.

## Results

### Descriptive statistics

A total of nine studies were included in the analysis. All of the studies used qualitative designs (n=9/100%), with different philosophical orientations, such as feminist and pragmatic methodologies, narrative inquiry and comparative case study approaches. The most commonly used data collection strategies were questionnaires (n=6/67%), focus groups (n=3/33%), individual interviews (n=3/33%), and document analysis (n=2/22%). Several studies used semi-structured interviews (n=4/44%). Other techniques such as observations, reflective journals, and creative visual tools were each used once (n=1/11%). Several studies used multiple data collection strategies, combining interviews with document analysis or observation. When it comes to participants, TAs were the primary focus in most studies (n=8/89%). Teachers (n=3/33%), pupils (n=2/22%), and administrators (n=1/11%) were also included. Some studies featured more than one type of participant.

Table 1 provides an overview of the included studies, displaying the author(s) and year of publication, research aims, methodological approaches and key findings.

*Table 1. Selected studies*

Author(s), year	Research aim	Research methods	Key findings
Kyriakides & Houssart (2016) (1)	Paraprofessionals' perspectives on supporting primary mathematics in Cyprus and England	Qualitative Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TAs play an important and varied role in supporting mathematics lessons.</li> <li>• TAs help with teacher led instruction</li> <li>• TAs often take on teaching responsibilities</li> <li>• This happens frequently without adequate training, support and recognition</li> </ul>
Johnson (2017) (2)	Teaching assistants' implementation of an early literacy intervention and its impact on their role	Qualitative Interviews, observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TAs play an important role in delivering literacy interventions</li> <li>• TAs experienced varying levels of support</li> <li>• TAs' confidence and sense of value were influenced by school culture, communication and access to good training</li> </ul>
Wren (2017) (3)	Comparing pupils' and teaching assistants' perspectives on the TA role	Qualitative Interviews, visual tools (drawing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TAs view their role primarily as managing behaviour</li> <li>• Pupils perceive TAs as academic helpers</li> <li>• A mismatch in role perception and unclear role boundaries was apparent</li> </ul>
Clarke (2019) (4)	Exploring gendered perceptions of teaching assistants' roles through a feminist lens	Qualitative Document analysis, questionnaires, focus group, interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TAs feel that managing behaviour is part of their role</li> <li>• TAs face unclear expectations and limited power</li> <li>• TAs feel the need to "know their place", based on unspoken boundaries and gendered assumptions</li> </ul>
Clarke & Visser (2019a) (5)	Teaching assistants' role in managing behaviour and their perceived 'place' in the classroom	Qualitative Document analysis, questionnaires, focus group, interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TAs see managing behaviour as part of their role</li> <li>• TAs experience confusion and lack of support, partly caused by being moved around classes</li> <li>• Poor communication with teachers also contributes to this issue</li> </ul>

Table 1. (continued)

Author(s), year	Research aim	Research methods	Key findings
Clarke & Visser (2019b) (6)	Teaching assistants' agency and the factors shaping their role in managing behaviour	Qualitative Document analysis, questionnaires, focus group, interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TAs view behaviour management as part of their role</li> <li>• TAs experience confusion and lack of support due to unclear expectations</li> <li>• TAs feel that limited agency affects their role</li> <li>• Gendered power dynamics also influence how TAs experience their role</li> </ul>
Pinkard (2021) (7)	Pupil's perspectives on individual teaching assistant support	Qualitative Interviews, visual tools (drawing, modelling)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pupils with SEN appreciate TAs for academic, emotional and social support</li> <li>• Pupils sometimes feel separated from their teachers and peers</li> <li>• Concerns exist about relying on TAs for one-to-one support</li> </ul>
Geeson & Clarke (2023) (8)	Teaching assistants' professional identity and the impact of role ambiguity and 'role-creep'	Qualitative Document analysis, questionnaires, focus group, interviews, categorisation tasks, timeline creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TAs' roles and identities change over time</li> <li>• This is caused by unclear expectations, changing tasks and the need to fit around teachers</li> </ul>
Hall & Webster (2023) (9)	Teaching assistants' changing roles during the pandemic and cost of living crisis and their lasting impact	Qualitative Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TAs took on broader and more intense roles during the COVID-19 recovery phase.</li> <li>• Academic, welfare, family support and specialist work were examples of this</li> <li>• Despite these increased responsibilities, TAs remain undervalued and underpaid</li> </ul>

## Narrative synthesis

The following narrative synthesis explores how the included studies defined the role of TAs across English primary schools. Several recurring themes were identified: the unclear and changing nature of the TA role, the behavioural management and emotional support role, the



instructional role, and the effects COVID-19 had on the TA role. These themes are described below in this narrative synthesis.

### **Unclear and changing roles**

A common finding across these four studies is the absence of a stable and universally agreed definition of the TA role. Geeson & Clarke (2022) show that participants' views of which tasks belong to TAs, teachers or both change over time. This was especially the case for TAs who went into teacher training. They found that there is not only a lack of consensus among school staff, but also variability in how TAs themselves define their responsibilities, suggesting that role definition can be dynamic and constructed personally. Clarke & Visser (2019a) also explore this theme, describing how TAs navigate their roles through an unspoken understanding of “knowing your place”. They found that TAs often regulate their own actions, in particular around behaviour management, by stepping back and avoiding “crossing the line”, even when they feel confident in their knowledge of the pupils and their needs. Clarke (2019) brings a gender perspective into this, suggesting that the TA role is shaped by not just being an assistant, but by its links to female care work. Clarke argues that the lack of role clarity for TAs is partly because of gender stereotypes that see them as ‘helpers’ or ‘motherly’ instead of skilled professionals. This influences how TAs are seen by others and how TAs see themselves. Building on this, Clarke & Visser (2019b) focus on agency, pointing out a disconnect between the responsibilities of TAs, especially in managing behaviour, and the limited freedom they’re given to actually make decisions. Because TAs often don’t get the support they need, like proper training, feedback or time to plan, their ability to take initiative depends on the situation. Leaving them in a flexible and sometimes vague position.

This lack of clarity is also found by Wren (2017), who explored how pupils and TAs described the TA role through interviews and visual methods, like drawings. Most pupils drew TAs as helpers with schoolwork, showing them holding books or pens, and described them as assisting with tasks like reading or writing. However, the TAs identified their main responsibility as managing pupil behaviour and ensuring classroom safety. This shows a mismatch in how the TA role is perceived in the classroom.

## **Managing behaviour and emotional support**

Roles in managing behaviour and emotional support were recurring across the studies. This includes managing classroom behaviour and keeping order, but also helping with anxiety and supporting pupils in making friends. Both Pinkard (2021) and Wren (2017) found that TAs offered emotional support, like offering comfort, helping with friendships and helping out with anxiety. Pupils in Pinkard's (2021) study reported that TA support made them feel included and improved their well-being. TAs in Wren's (2017) study saw their main role as managing behaviour, keeping pupils focused, stopping disruptions and ensuring safety. Clarke and Visser (2019a) also found that TAs frequently viewed behaviour support to be an important responsibility, for example when keeping classroom order. Findings from Hall and Webster (2023) further show this role, especially during the COVID-19 recovery period. They showed how schools relied on TAs for behavioural interventions and informal counselling.

## **TAs taking on teaching duties**

Another recurring role was the instructional role. This included just helping with learning tasks, but also in the form of planning lessons and delivering academic interventions. Both Pinkard (2021) and Wren (2017) included pupils' perspectives in their research to define the TA role. They showed that TAs help pupils with learning by breaking tasks down into smaller steps and slowly stepping back to stimulate independence. Wren (2017) used visual methods (like drawings) and interviews to demonstrate how pupils viewed their TAs. The study found that pupils tended to see their TAs as helpers with schoolwork, often drawing them holding pens or books. Pinkard (2021) found that pupils experienced feelings of over-dependence on TAs, for example, always having the TA nearby and frustration when taken out of class for support.

This instructional role was a theme across more studies. Kyriakides & Houssart (2016) found that TAs supporting in mathematics frequently introduced new content, planned lessons and addressed difficulties independently. The authors formulated three main roles, class focus, special education focus and lone worker. These roles were not official role definitions but emerged from patterns in TA interviews. While the TAs were confident in their ability to support in mathematics, the roles were shaped by context and necessity rather than formal guidance. This was especially true for the 'lone workers', who often operated almost as teachers, taking on big responsibilities without formal preparation or support. Similarly, Johnson (2018) observed that

TAs delivering the FFTW3 literacy intervention often worked independently, and were flexible with timing to keep the intervention going. Although they received some initial training, ongoing support was limited. This highlights a gap between the responsibilities TAs are given and the support they need to manage them effectively. Both studies show TAs often take on roles more like teachers, despite not being formally trained, supported or recognized as such (Johnson, 2018; Kyriakides & Houssart, 2016). Even in subject-specific contexts, where tasks were clearer, TAs' roles were still not always well defined, depending on how much guidance they got from teachers, how well they communicated with school leaders and how included they were in the school overall (Johnson, 2018; Kyriakides & Houssart, 2016).

Hall and Webster (2023) reported similar findings during the COVID-19 recovery phase. TAs were delivering academic interventions, sometimes up to four sessions per morning. These tasks were added without formal role guidance. Although this was a response to emergency conditions, the responsibilities resembled those typically assigned to teachers, again without the training, support or formal recognition.

### **How COVID-19 redefined TA roles**

One study included in this review, showcased the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on TAs roles. Hall and Webster (2023) show how the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent cost of living crisis have redefined the TA role. As mentioned earlier, TAs played a major part in delivering academic interventions during the recovery phase of COVID-19. In addition to this, they took on new responsibilities such as supporting pupils' emotional well-being, helping families and even covering for specialists like speech and language therapists. In some schools they led toilet training or did informal counselling for parents. These responsibilities were added on top of existing tasks, often without proper training and formal recognition. TAs described this period as more intense than anything they had experienced before.

The study also noted that a lot of these extra responsibilities remained after schools reopened. TAs reported feeling unprepared for these extra tasks, especially when expected to perform responsibilities normally performed by specialists. Schools saw signs of burnout, as TAs were expected to constantly adapt to changing roles and responsibilities. The cost of living crisis also made it harder for many TAs to continue being TAs. Some TAs considered looking for better paid work. Headteachers were concerned about the retention of TAs and the recruitment of new

TAs. Hall and Webster (2023) suggest that lasting solutions, such as clearer role definitions, support and better pay, are needed to sustain the TA role in schools.

## **Discussion**

This systematic review examines how teaching assistants' roles are defined in English primary schools. The findings suggest that TA roles are commonly defined in informal and inconsistent ways. They are defined by needs of the school and personal interpretation, rather than policy. Across the findings, TAs are found to take on behavioural management and emotional support roles. Multiple studies also noted a shift towards instructional responsibilities, often without clear guidance or sufficient training. During the COVID-19 recovery period these patterns became even more apparent, with TAs assuming a wider range of responsibilities, sometimes even taking on specialist's responsibilities, without formal recognition or training.

### **Unclear Roles**

The lack of a clearly defined role was a consistent finding across the studies in this review. Geeson & Clarke (2023) found that TAs' responsibilities changed over time and were often not formally defined. TAs also experienced a lack of autonomy and support to make important decisions, often stepping back under the motto of "knowing your place" (Clarke & Visser, 2019a, Clarke, 2019). Wren (2017) found that TAs and pupils had different understandings of what a TAs role was, which further showed the unclarity of the TA role. This lack of clarity is a recurring theme in research about TAs. Farrell et al (1999) expressed concerns about the unclear roles, insufficient training and inconsistent deployment and found that this lack of structure reduced their potential. Bach et al. (2006) also mentioned how the role boundaries of TAs were blurred, and the responsibilities were often shaped by the schools needs rather than policy.

### **Behavioural and Emotional Support**

Just like previous research by Paju et al. (2021) and Harris and Aprile (2015), the findings of this review indicate that managing behaviour and giving emotional support are common aspects of the TA role in practice. TAs were consistently described as supporting pupils emotionally, helping with anxiety and maintaining classroom order (Pinkard, 2021; Wren, 2017).

Clarke and Visser (2019a) also showed that managing behaviour is a big part of the TA role, even though these role definitions are not in official job descriptions, but are formed based on everyday practices.

### **A shift towards instructional responsibilities**

This review found that TAs are taking on instructional roles. TAs, in subject specific contexts, planned lessons, introduced new content and taught on their own (Kyriakides & Houssart, 2016; Johnson, 2018). This was also the case during the COVID-19 recovery period, where TAs delivered academic interventions, without training or formal recognition. These findings reflect existing concerns in the literature. Farrell et al (1999) and Bach et al. (2006) both warned about the unclear roles of TAs, as well as the increase of TAs carrying out complex instructional tasks, sometimes even covering full lessons. The DISS study (Blatchford et al., 2009) and the EEF guidance report (Sharples et al., 2015) also mentioned and criticized the practice of using TAs as (informal) teaching substitutes, especially for students with the highest needs of extra support. An example of this found in this review can be seen in Pinkard's (2021) study, who found that pupils often associated TAs with instructional roles, with some pupils expressing frustration about being removed from the classroom or always having the TA nearby. Previous studies have noted that utilizing TAs like this can construct the TA role as a substitute for teacher interaction (Webster & Blatchford, 2014; Paju et al., 2021). Giangreco (2021) calls this "an island in the mainstream" where the TA takes on a role that replaces pupil's interaction with teachers and peers.

### **Effects of COVID-19**

The findings of this review show that the COVID-19 pandemic expanded the responsibilities of TAs in English primary schools. Hall and Webster (2023) found that TAs delivered academic interventions, took on emotional support responsibilities, family assistance and even specialist tasks such as informal counselling and speech therapy. This role expansion was often done without formal training or recognition. This expansion during the COVID-19 recovery period reflects a pattern that is also noted by Webster and De Boer (2021), who argue that the pandemic sped up already existing trends of using TAs to fill in gaps in education. In

particular, they show how TAs were important in national “catch-up” strategies, once again defining the TA role as flexible.

### **Role definitions vary, even within the classroom**

Despite unclarity in roles being apparent in the existing literature, the difference between how pupils and TAs viewed the TA role was an unexpected finding. The findings of this review show the extent to which this unclarity goes, with even stakeholders within the same classroom having different perceptions. Wren (2017) found a mismatch in how pupils and TAs view the TA role. Pupils saw TAs mainly as academic helpers, while TAs saw themselves as responsible for managing behaviour and ensuring classroom safety. This finding is relevant to the research question because it shows that TA roles are not only unclearly defined, but also up for interpretation by the perspective of those involved.

### **TA roles and the broader goals of inclusive education**

When looking at how TA roles are defined in English primary schools, it is important to also consider how these roles relate to the broader context and goals of inclusive education. Despite Booth and Ainscow’s (2002) Index for Inclusion emphasizing that inclusive education requires systemic changes in culture, policy and pedagogy, the findings of this review indicate that the TA role is often deployed in a reactive way. TAs are often used to fill in gaps, like performing instructional roles they’re not properly trained for (Kyriakides & Houssart, 2016., Johnson, 2018) or covering specialists’ responsibilities during a crisis (Hall & Webster, 2023). This reinforces the “jack of all trades” view of the TA role that Harris and Aprile (2015) formulated in their study. This ‘reactive way’ reflects what Giangreco (2021) describes as the “Maslow’s Hammer” effect, which is the tendency to use TAs as a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to challenges in inclusive education.

Inclusive education is emphasized in national and international policy frameworks like the SEND Code of Practice (2015). However, the findings in this review show that TA roles in practice are unclearly defined, not implemented consistently but shaped by what the school needs in the moment. This lack of role clarity that is a recurring finding in research (Farell et al., 1999; Bach et al., 2006; Blatchford et al., 2009; Lewis, 2025) suggests a gap between the intentions of the policies and the immediate needs of the schools in practice. Giangreco (2021) says that if the

focus stays on TAs instead of improving the whole system, it would hold back the deeper changes that are really needed for inclusion.

## **Conclusion**

This review focused on how TA roles are defined in English primary schools. It found that TA roles are often unclear and flexible. Their roles are shaped and defined by school needs and personal interpretation, rather than policies or formal job descriptions. Despite this unclarity, most studies found that TAs had responsibilities in behaviour management and emotional support. In addition to this, a clear shift towards more instructional responsibilities was found across the studies, with TAs sometimes taking on teaching duties, without proper training or formal recognition. During the COVID-19 recovery period, these responsibilities were amplified. TAs took on additional emotional and instructional roles, and took on tasks usually handled by specialists. The theme of role unclarity became extra apparent when one study found that stakeholders from the same classroom, TAs and pupils, both had different perceptions of the TA role and responsibilities.

## **Limitations**

This review has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results of the research. First of all, this review included nine studies, which limits how the findings can represent how TA roles are defined across all primary schools in England. All nine included studies were qualitative of nature, so the results might not apply to other schools or situations. Four of the studies (Clarke, 2019; Clarke & Visser, 2019a; Clarke & Visser 2019b; Geeson & Clarke, 2023) were based on the same or overlapping datasets. Despite exploring different aspects of the TA role, such as identity, gender, or behaviour management, this overlap in data is important to keep in mind, because the variety of findings is more limited than it might seem. This review was done by one researcher, which could have had influence on how the studies were selected or interpreted. Most studies explored the views of TAs, with fewer studies focusing on teachers, pupils and school leaders. This means that the findings might not give a complete picture of how roles are defined by everyone involved.

## **Implications for future research**

Future research could address these limitations and gaps. Research methods different from qualitative, like quantitative research could provide a more broader, more generalizable role definition of TAs. A broader understanding of the TA role could also be achieved by including more stakeholders in future research, such as teachers, pupils and school leaders. Just like Sharma and Salend (2016) note, the research about TAs in inclusive education is mostly based on qualitative studies, and there is a need for studies with larger sample sizes and more varied participants.

## **Implications for future practice and policy**

The findings of this review show a gap between the goals of inclusive education and how TAs are used in practice. TA roles are often used in a reactive way to meet short-term needs. To make the best use of TAs, their roles need to be clearly defined within the broader context of the goals of inclusive education. To improve role clarity, standardized role descriptions should be formulated for TAs in inclusive classrooms. Distinctions between instructional and non-instructional tasks should be clear to avoid ‘role creep’. When instructional roles are expected of TAs, schools should provide the training that is necessary to be able to perform these tasks. Schools should also focus on improving the communication between TAs and teachers, further improving the role clarity and expectations. To avoid what Giangreco (2021) calls ‘an island in the mainstream’, schools should avoid long-term 1:1 pairings of pupils and TAs. Finally, it is important to realise, as Giangreco (2021) argues, the focus shouldn’t only be on TAs, but also on the whole system in which they work. Therefore, future practice and policy should also look at other factors that are important to inclusive education, to improve the whole system.



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