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### Where next for research on teaching assistants

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ARTICLE



## Where next for research on teaching assistants: the case for an international response

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, the guest editors consider the direction of research on teaching assistants (TAs), and how academics can elevate the field within the spheres of education and the social sciences. We begin by unpicking, and endorsing, Giangreco's idea of applying the 'Maslow's Hammer test' (expressed in this special issue) to manuscripts about studies of TAs and inclusion to journal editorship and peer review processes. The purpose of the test is to address the disproportionate attention paid by researchers to a set of narrow and recurring interests, and to open up new lines of inquiry and discussions about the innovative methodological approaches required to operationalise them. Secondly, we describe a persistent and urgent research gap: the shortage of international data on TAs. Given the pre-eminence of TA deployment as a means to facilitate access to and participation in mainstream education for pupils with special educational needs, we argue that the continued lack of large-scale data on TAs' characteristics, experiences, practices and impact poses a risk to advancing the global inclusion agenda. Finally, we make a call for expressions of interest in establishing an international research network to help expand, empower and raise the esteem the field of scholarship on TAs.

### KEYWORDS

Teaching assistants;  
Paraprofessionals; Research;  
TALIS

## Introduction

In his paper for this special issue, one of the long-time researchers on paraprofessional issues in inclusive schools, Michael Giangreco (2021), challenges journal editors and reviewers to ask whether research submitted for publication in academic titles 'fills an important gap in the literature that substantially extends our understanding and holds the potential to improve practice'. In a sense, this is a self-evident – perhaps the minimal – criterion for any paper under consideration by a serious academic journal. But, as Giangreco makes clear, the root of his appeal comes from a long-standing concern over the lack of diversity in the corpus of empirical and theoretical work on teaching assistants (TAs) and inclusion.

For some researchers, his article may make for uncomfortable reading. But it is necessary, urgent and correct. We believe it is not that the field lacks talented researchers,

nor that the quality of the research undertaken is especially low, compared with other disciplines within education. The research community, however, must take seriously Giangreco's assertion that the narrow focus and framing of much of the research on and involving TAs has created what he refers to as a 'research whirlpool' from which we need to break free.

A recurring set of limited themes – specifically: role clarification; training (including planning time with teachers); and supervision – have become the predominant preoccupations of many researchers investigating TAs. To be clear, these themes are important areas of inquiry, thought and development. As more and more jurisdictions worldwide instigate programmes to create and expand a TA workforce – driven, at least in part, in many countries by parents advocating for the use of TAs (Sharma and Salend 2016) – data and evidence on these themes will remain essential if governments are to avoid the kinds of latent issues that were unintentionally baked into the US and UK systems when they were initiated decades ago.

So while researchers must keep one eye on these matters, it is imperative that we look to new horizons, too. Giangreco is right when he says that we need to extend the topics and areas of inquiry that will compose the 'palate of future research'. His 'wish list' offers us some ideas and inspiration for liberating ourselves from the orbit of the 'research whirlpool'. But if our field of scholarship is to advance meaningfully, and our work is to have the tangible impact in schools and classrooms we all want, the research community will need more than just new horizons to which to travel. We will need the means to get there.

In this closing paper of the special issue, we first explore and address the 'foundational question' Giangreco poses to us, as journal editors and reviewers: how to respond to research that centres on familiar issues and which contribute seemingly little to the sum of what we know about TAs. We then build on the recommendations in Giangreco's 'wish list' in a new and specific way, by discussing the urgent need to address the shortage of international data on TAs. Finally, we propose an internationally minded solution to our own challenge of how to expand the field and build the esteem of scholarship on TAs.

### **Applying the 'Maslow's Hammer test'**

Giangreco's entreaty to the research community is for us, collectively, to 'stop perseverating' 'on a small set of the same issues related to TAs'. He identifies role clarity, training, planning time with teachers, and supervision as the most commonly researched themes that appear in the literature. On the basis of the response to the call for papers for this special issue, we can confirm the existence of what we might call (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) 'Giangreco's prophecy'. The majority of abstracts and manuscripts that this rare invitation to publish on the topic of TAs attracted covered TAs' roles, training, planning and supervision. It is worth adding that as experienced reviewers, a great many of the requests we receive to review manuscripts for other journals can be categorised under at least one of these headings.

There is a danger – of which Giangreco is all too aware – that his call for the research community to move on from studies focusing on this narrow set of themes is misread as a critical indictment: that we have over-tilled these patches of the field; we have learned all we are likely to learn about role clarity, etc., and any that further effort is time wasted.

This, as he clearly states, is emphatically *not* the message. Nevertheless, the same issues continue to attract researchers' attention.

So why is this? One plausible reason is that the literature base is composed to no small extent on work built from research by postgraduates and doctoral students. Again, prominent in the abstracts submitted for this special issue was work based on Masters and PhD theses. Nothing too out of the ordinary there perhaps, but we note that some of the under-researched topics on and involving TAs are also those that are more difficult to undertake by one (and often, by definition, less experienced) researcher.

We are thinking here specifically of large-scale, multi-method studies and research on the overreliance on TAs – be that on the part of pupils, parents, schools or entire education systems. Addressing research questions that explore individuals' intentions and values, their competency, or the quality of their decision-making, are potentially emotive. As school-based research, especially at postgraduate level, relies on maintaining cordial relationships with schools and staff, students may understandably veer away from research topics that they perceive as carrying a higher risk to success. Add to this the fact that the focus of such inquiries are TAs – the practitioners with perhaps the least amount of power and agency within the education system – and there are more than enough elements to blow a dissertation project off course. In this reading, perhaps what we see is a function of early career researchers sticking to safer, albeit they anodyne, topics, which can be researched in schools without causing disruption or disquiet.

It is worth adding that oftentimes, findings relating to TA deployment, practice and/or preparation emerge as side-issues from analyses of data collected on an attendant topic or from research participants other than TAs; that is, from studies where TAs are not the principal focus, for example: classroom experiences of pupils with a specific type of learning difficulty; or teachers' confidence and competence to teach those with special educational needs.

That so many of the papers on TAs submitted to journals stem from postgraduate or doctoral research directly or indirectly about TAs, arguably explains Sharma and Salend's (2016) observation that the evidence base is 'characterized by the use of qualitative research designs, relatively small sample sizes, and self-reports that focus on the perceptions of participants, who are mostly TAs' (p127). We would add that it is the intrinsic nature of the routinely occurring themes that reinforces the propensity for researchers to deploy qualitative techniques in their inquiries.

We must be upfront here, and say that while these observations are drawn from experience, they are necessarily speculative. Our conclusions should not be construed as a criticism of researchers. We do not assume or ascribe either the fixation on recurring issues, or the methodological tilt we detect in our work as editors/reviewers, to researchers' lack of imagination or skill. Indeed, the reasons why certain issues and topics relating to TAs remain under-researched, under-represented – even unaddressed – in the literature may have more to do with factors that we *perceive* to be beyond the control of researchers; that is, that the research agenda as it relates to TAs is decided by actors (e.g. governments, funders) outside of our influence. We will return to this shortly, but let us first address the matter of how we might determine whether papers that focus on the core issues merit publication.

Here, Giangreco suggests we apply the 'Maslow's Hammer test'. Essentially, this requires researchers to address two questions in their manuscripts. Firstly, whether the

design of the research they undertake, the findings they report, and the new practices they may recommend to educators, risks reinforcing an inappropriate overreliance on TAs; for example, could the real-world application of their research result in the familiar, or even intensified, utilisation of TAs to the exclusion of considering alternatives? Secondly, if the research demonstrates the effectiveness of a particular model of TA deployment in a particular context, what might be the potential drawbacks or opportunity costs?; for example, would more time with a TA mean that pupils with learning difficulties spend less time with their teacher?

It should be incumbent on researchers, as Giangreco says, to ‘fram[e] the[ir] research in ways that puts these issues in a fuller context ... since they do not exist in a vacuum’. Researchers must take the initiative here, as it is their work under review. But journal editors and reviewers have a responsibility, too. They must apply the test in the process of peer review, and if the authors have not given sufficient consideration to the Maslow’s Hammer effect, they should be directed to address them in their revisions. There is no better time, and no more urgent cause, to which we can apply the ‘Maslow’s Hammer test’ than the one we face right now.

The compilation of this special issue on international research has taken place against the backdrop of an unprecedented global pandemic. The world into which this special issue arrives (May 2021) is different to the one in which we put out the call for papers two years previously. There has been much talk in the UK, the US and elsewhere, about the response to the significant disruption to learning caused by Covid-19. Presently, schools are being encouraged to invest in one-to-one and small group tuition to help pupils ‘catch-up’, as we return to something akin to business as usual (Department for Education 2020; Slavin et al. 2020). In many systems, what is a staple of the TA role is, therefore, poised to become a principal tool in making up for lost time and mitigating the worst effects of lockdown-induced school closures.

As the consistently positive, though strangely unheralded, research and evidence on the impact of curriculum interventions delivered by TAs (Alborz et al. 2009; Sharples 2016; Slavin 2016, 2018; Nickow, Oreopoulos, and Quan 2020) becomes increasingly relevant to school leaders’ decision-making – in terms of which programmes are most likely to boost learning – so the importance of considering the wider processes and contexts within which these programmes are implemented become critical to the overall integration and success of ‘catch-up’.

For researchers evaluating the impact of such programmes, and indeed the developers of these interventions, this means being clear about the limitations of, and alternatives to, deploying TAs to deliver individualised and small group instruction. The message for researchers, journal editors and reviewers is, therefore, quite clear. To paraphrase Giangreco, research papers claiming to have found an effective way of training and deploying TAs is a necessary, but not sufficient condition, for publication. Hereon, we must all be responsible for raising the bar to publication. If there is a risk that a new approach to TA training or TA deployment could ‘inadvertently exacerbate double standards, increase stigmatisation, interfere with teacher engagement [or] extend the training trap’ (Giangreco 2021), researchers *must* be explicit about this in the presentation of their data and/or through a robust theoretical discussion. And journal editors and reviewers should demand to see it in their manuscript, if it is to meet the standard for publication. We think this is a reasonable and realistic requirement.

It is worth noting that we need not be concerned about whether applying the ‘Maslow’s Hammer test’ to the process of writing and reviewing research papers on TAs could lead to fewer manuscripts being prepared and submitted to journals. The call for papers for this special issue drew almost 50 abstracts from across the world. Therefore, we do not think the supply of research papers is an issue. Setting a slightly higher, but still achievable, bar for the acceptance of all papers on TAs (not just those centred on the recurrent issues) – which sees authors apply a layer of analysis and contextualisation that explicitly addresses counterfactuals<sup>1</sup> – has the potential to begin the overdue work of elevating the discussion and necessarily disrupting a well-intentioned, though misplaced, precept underpinning special and inclusive education.

### Addressing the international data shortage

Getting better at articulating and contextualising research on TAs is, however, just one element of what needs to happen if we are to move the field on in new and important ways. In their analysis of the international, empirical studies of TAs in inclusive classrooms (published between 2005 and 2015), Sharma and Salend (2016) reach a similar conclusion to Giangreco (2021) in terms of identifying areas for future research on which there are currently only a very limited number of studies, or none at all. These include: parents’ perspectives on the use of TAs; perceptions of pupils with disabilities, regarding their experiences with TAs (including any differences between those with high incidence disabilities and low incidence disabilities); how pupils without disabilities ‘view the roles, efficacy, and presence of TAs in their classrooms’; and ‘research to develop and validate alternatives to the use of TAs’ (Sharma and Salend 2016).

As well as broadening the range of research topics, we must show a greater degree of ambition in our methodological approaches. Where are the heavyweight, international comparative studies of TAs? Or studies involving large sample sizes, or more varied sets of participants and stakeholders? Or multi-method, longitudinal research efforts that can offer policymakers and practitioners alike much more than vogueish and reductive econometric analyses, which attempt to divine a causal relationship between TAs and academic outcomes, but take no account of school and classroom processes? (see, e.g. Andersen et al. 2018; Hemelt, Ladd, and Clifton 2021). Twelve years on from the publication of findings from the pioneering DISS project in the UK (Blatchford et al. 2009), we have yet to see anything that approaches its scale and scope, or aspires to its influence and impact.

Despite their increasing prevalence in schools across the world, international- and macro-level data on TAs are all but absent. That is why we propose an ambitious, ongoing programme of data collection and evidence building that reflects, and is proportionate to, the global trend towards employing and deploying TAs in educational settings.

Lauded by policymakers and researchers of advanced nations for the richness of its data and the detailed insights it provides, the most influential international study on schools and classrooms, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), has vanishing little say about TAs. While remedying this, we think, has intrinsic merits, perhaps the greater case for action is the fact that other high-level assessments of education, nationally and internationally, rely on the descriptive data supplied by TALIS – which we now know to be incomplete when it comes to this growing cadre of practitioners. For example, a major

global assessment of inclusion (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2020), to which we will return, was unable to report much at all about the characteristics, role and contribution of TAs, because of the international and national shortage of data on TAs. Its conclusions were limited to a familiar recycling of what we already know from the (mainly small-scale and qualitative) research base.

The third and most recent wave of TALIS from 2018 – which involved over 275,000 respondents from 31 countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2021a) – stated that ‘teacher aides [and] pedagogical support staff ... were not considered to be teachers and, thus, not part of the TALIS international target population’ (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2021b). Assuming there is, or there ought to be, an equivalence between TAs and teachers is a curious pretext on which to exclude TAs from the survey. Furthermore, and equally puzzling, is this: TALIS ‘relies on teachers’ and school leaders’ expertise as *professionals* to describe their work situation as accurately as possible, as well as their experiences in and feelings about their schools and working conditions’ [emphasis added] (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2021a). Surely being a qualified/certified teacher is not a precondition for being able to *accurately* complete a questionnaire about one’s work situation, experiences, etc? Why should TALIS’s data collection not extend to paraprofessionals?

Adding TAs as an additional, separate survey would no doubt have implications for the administration costs of TALIS, which is perhaps a plausible reason for not including them hitherto. But with the number of TAs set only to rise globally, and cumulative amounts of public money spent on their employment, there is a strong case for national governments to show as much interest in the working lives, practices and perspectives of TAs as they do in those of teachers. It makes sense, therefore, to extend an existing data collection effort that is funded by, and maps education labour force trends in, the most world’s advanced economies. This being so, one might reason that the resourcing issue is easily surmountable.

Equally, if not more vital, is the fact that TALIS data feed into authoritative international reviews, such as the annual Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report, hosted and published by UNESCO. GEM reports ‘serve as a foundation for evidence-based advocacy to promote progress towards SDG 4’ (the fourth Sustainable Development Goal on education) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2021c). The 2020 report, as we noted above, provided a macro assessment of inclusion.

One of its key messages was that ‘data on teaching assistants is limited, even in high-income [e.g. TALIS] countries’ (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2020, 300). A particular challenge concerns the way ‘definitions and labels in data collection instruments vary across countries and education levels’ (p305), and how, in the aggregate, it becomes difficult to explicitly differentiate between qualified/certified teachers and TAs. The report cites the example of the South African government, which collects data on ‘educators’, who are defined as ‘any person who teaches, educates or trains other persons or who provides professional education services’ (South Africa Department of Basic Education, 2018, p34). Further complications arise where TAs have a predominantly non-pedagogical role. The GEM report (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2020) speculates that data collection may be a matter of priorities, and that the variation is a function of the extent to which inclusion



is mainstreamed in a particular country or territory. As the report concludes, 'comparable international data on inclusion-related use of support personnel are not generally available' (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2020, 306).

As a rare international survey of the characteristics, employment and working conditions of just over 3,000 'education support personnel' [ESP], commissioned by Education International (the global union federation of teacher trade unions), concluded: 'there are significant gaps in the knowledge and understanding of ESP: who they are, what they do, and what they need to do their jobs effectively' (Butler 2019, 1). Though we do not suppose it will be straightforward, much like the resourcing issue we noted above, addressing this seemingly theological question should not be beyond the conceptual and methodological capabilities of the international research community. Taking the time to characterise and crystallise a limited set of descriptive labels that capture the core functions of TAs across jurisdictions (starting with those that participate in TALIS) is foundational to producing the data that fuel the types of analyses that have, via TALIS – impressively, and in relatively short order – transformed and enhanced our understanding of teachers and teaching.

Many of the themes selected for inclusion in the 2018 TALIS survey are relatable to the lives of TAs: instructional practices; professional practices; initial preparation for role; school climate; job satisfaction; human resource issues; stakeholder relations; career opportunities; and professional responsibility and autonomy. At the more basic, but nonetheless essential descriptive level, such a survey would be able to track demographic trends relating to equality, diversity and representation. Essential, you would think, for a role synonymous with inclusion.

Elsewhere, the GEM report points to how a broader 'shortage of data on teachers' from countries that are not included in TALIS represents one of three 'data gaps remain[ing] in key areas of the SDG 4 monitoring framework' (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2020, 198). The macro data gap relating to TAs can be seen as part of the same issue. Providing and sharing the robust evidence needed to underpin policy-making and practice, and to hold world leaders to account, are essential if we are to achieve SDG 4. Progress will be all the slower, if not unworkable, without a coordinated and consolidated data collection effort that incorporates and reflects the role and contribution of TAs.

The next cycle of TALIS, due in 2024, is perhaps the first opportunity to pilot a survey for TAs in a select number of territories where they are a well-established part of the school workforce. Survey items could be limited to questions drawn from several of the most relatable themes from the teacher survey (see above), and trialled in countries such as the US, the UK, Norway and Finland; countries that are not only above the OECD average in terms of TA-pupil ratio (7.3 TAs per 1,000 pupils) (Masdeu Navarro, 2015), but also have large enough numbers of TAs from which a meaningful sample can be drawn. We might extend our pilot to Brazil, Chile, France, the Netherlands and Sweden, which an interrogation of the most recent OECD data from 2018 suggests also have sufficiently sizable and sampleable TA populations across both primary and secondary education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2021d).

It is worth adding that researchers will, at the same time, need to maintain, even scale-up, data collection within and across schools and classrooms. Amassing comprehensive administrative data on the characteristics, roles, practices, etc. of TAs has clear benefits,

but if we are to add depth and meaning to arms-length econometric analyses, we will also require reliable contextual data on school and classroom processes. Relatedly, researchers will need to consider the overall lack of data on the impact of TAs on pupil outcomes. Crucially, this demands we take a view of outcomes that are broadly construed, and for us to be cognisant of the various and nuanced effects TAs can have, both directly and indirectly, on academic *and* non-academic domains. It is a reminder that the potentially transformative ideas for improving policy and practice exist in the skilful accumulation, harmonisation and utilisation of data at the macro, meso and micro levels.

### **An international research network: a call to researchers**

We reach the end of this special issue with a sense of which themes ought to be the focus of future research on and involving TAs, and why. We have not delved too deeply into the methodological challenges and complexities that will likely arise from addressing some of the research questions stemming from these topics, but we do not doubt that the collective knowledge and talent exists within the education research community to overcome them. If, as we suppose, the responsibility to begin pushing the field forward lies with those most interested and specialised in researching TAs and their role (and as a reader of this special issue, we very hope you include yourself in this group), then the immediate question facing us is this: how do we do it? In this final section of our paper, we set out a mechanism for planning and organising research activity, and invite feedback from readers on our proposal.

Readers may disagree with the research priorities outlined in this paper, but we are all likely to agree on this: the field of research on TAs lacks a dedicated forum within which researchers and others can even have such debates. In 2020, some of the contributors to this special issue took a small step towards bringing researchers from across the world together, in the shape of a symposium at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER). The symposium aimed to explore the intersection between inclusive education and TA deployment in the UK, the USA and Germany. The organisers hoped to initiate a dialogue across countries on the benefits of, the challenges for, and alternatives to TA deployment. ECER 2020, due to be held in Glasgow, was inevitably cancelled because of Covid-19. While a scaled-down event went ahead online, the proposers of the symposium felt that a videoconference event would lack the appeal and vibrancy of a real-world event. Despite the opportunities for networking that platforms such as Zoom have created for us since the pandemic hit, we have yet to replicate the informal spaces that exist at physical conferences, away from the lecture theatres, where researchers can convene, often spontaneously, to share experiences, discuss, debate and develop ideas and proposals.

Hopefully, in the post-pandemic world, the ECER symposium will be revived, and researchers will be able to get together in person. More hopefully, it will be the first of many such events. And more hopefully still, these talks, seminars and symposia will evolve into a regular, international conference with a principal focus on TAs and TA research. What we are describing here may sound like the product of an organic process, but of course, we know better. If anything *is* to happen, it requires a spark, followed by some careful nurturing, and then purposeful coordination in order to bring it to life. In short, the research community will need to create it for itself.

What do we imagine this vehicle looks like? We envisage an international network for researchers interested in all aspects of the life and work of TAs. We are aware that many national educational research associations have a special interest group for those researching special and inclusive education, and which by extension, tend to provide an intellectual home for researchers studying TAs. However, research on TAs, much like the role itself, traverses and transcends the areas of interest to those studying special and inclusive education. As is evident from the themes of the 2018 TALIS teacher survey – which we noted above, are relatable to the lives and work of TAs – research on and involving TAs straddles disciplines outside of education, such as economics, feminism and labour relations.

This special issue presents a timely opportunity to call for the creation of a network specifically designed to support research on TAs. That said, TAs may be too narrow a focus for a viable special interest group. It might be that our field would be better served by widening and reframing our focus onto something we might nascently term ‘paraprofessional studies’. As we noted in our introduction to this special issue, the increase of TAs in education can be seen in the broader context of the rise in paraprofessionals across public services. Professional roles in health, social work, law, the police have been similarly redefined (to various extents) with the introduction of paraprofessionals. Evidence from the UK and the US demonstrates a redrawing of the boundaries between the roles of established professionals and others who work in their respective fields (Kessler, Bach, and Heron 2005; Thornley 1997; Wallace 2003). We go further and suggest that, on the basis of evidence presented in the papers in this special issue (for example, Östlund et al. 2021; Zhao, Rose, and Shevlin 2021), there are contexts in which TAs may have multiple paraprofessional identities, with the roles of individual TAs combining or bridging between functions of education and care.

Our international research network would be a lively, democratic space in which researchers from across education and the social sciences could convene around the topic of paraprofessionals. Work on TAs would constitute a productive site for activity in its own right, but there would also be potential for rich, innovative ideas to bloom from exciting exchanges and interactions with researchers across the world investigating the role and lives of paraprofessionals in other disciplines (e.g. healthcare assistants; paralegals). We would want our network to draw in policymakers and practitioners as well, thereby creating a dynamic, multidisciplinary interface between the worlds of research, policy and practice.

With this, the first major collection of international writing on teaching assistants in over two decades<sup>2</sup>, we have an unmissable opportunity to reach out to readers and researchers interested in any and all aspects of TAs, and paraprofessionals more broadly. Therefore, we invite you to contact the corresponding author in order to express your interest in, and thoughts on, establishing an international research network of this nature.

## Final thoughts

There is, we think, an interesting parallel between what we are saying in this paper about moving the field of TA-related research on and the TA role and experience itself. It is a parallel that will be recognisable to and resonate with many researchers. A common refrain voiced not just by researchers but also by groups that represent TAs’ interests, such

as trade unions, is that TAs should be treated with greater respect and value. In education systems where TAs are an established presence, researchers and advocates rightly maintain that the contribution of TAs is habitually and too easily overlooked, and that a higher esteeming of their role is long overdue. We believe that researchers should be arguing for the same kind of recognition and for a greater valuing of *their* field of inquiry within the arenas of policy, practice and academia.

Researchers conclude, again correctly, that it is the power imbalances within schools and education systems overall that maintain the status quo: TAs are limited in terms of the influence they have over instigating change in their context. But here there is a crucial difference. Unlike TAs, in *their* context, researchers and academics are more agentic. If we are to move our field on, there are things we can do right away. We can start by agreeing to apply the 'Maslow's Hammer test' to *all* aspects of the research process, in our own endeavours and supportively as part of collegiate activities, such as peer review and supervision. We can choose to make acceptance of manuscripts for publication contingent on a more nuanced, contextually aware framing and critique of research findings, in order to avoid reinforcing the practices that position TAs as the solution to inclusion. We can shape and set a new and exciting research agenda. We can expand and develop our suite of methodological approaches, making our research more innovative and responsive to a rapidly evolving education landscape. And crucially, we can focus more resources on actually addressing, in collaboration with schools, some of the persistent real-world problems caused by and connected to an overreliance on TAs, instead of trying to mitigate their worst effects. As Giangreco (2021) says, none of this runs counter to the view we all hold about the value of 'the ongoing and significant contributions of our TA colleagues'. We imply no disrespect to hard-working TAs. What is key here is thinking more expansively and collaboratively about the bigger picture: improving the participation of and outcomes for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities.

Given TAs' lack of agency, researchers understandably target the messages from their work to policymakers. As we consider the post-pandemic world, and identify and address the problems exacerbated and caused by national lockdowns (time out of school; lack of access to specialist and peripatetic services, such as physiotherapy), we have little reason to think that after decades of side-lining TAs, policymakers are about to listen us or to act on our evidence immediately. As some of the empirical work included in this special issue attests, it is perhaps the dialogic, collaborative work between researchers and practitioners and pupils in schools that offers us the best, most direct, expedient to change.

Our final appeal is to researchers to capitalise on this potential, and assert ourselves in this reimagined space, so that *we* might use *our* work – too much of which remains confined to the pages of journals – to catalyse real change on the ground, in schools.

## Notes

- (1) It was with precisely this point in mind that we ensured the authors whose abstracts were accepted for this special issue had sight of a near-final draft of Giangreco's article, and encouraged them to consider its themes and conclusions in their own papers.
- (2) As we noted in our introductory article, the *European Journal of Special Needs Education* is only the second academic title of which we are aware to publish a special issue on the

topic of TAs. The *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps* (Vol 24, Issue 4) published a special issue on paraprofessionals in 1999.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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