

**An Exploratory Study of Classroom Assistant
Support for Special Educational Needs in Post-
Primary Schools in Northern Ireland.**



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Declaration

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing, which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except where specifically indicated in the text. It has not been previously submitted, in part or whole, to any university or institution for any degree, diploma, or other qualification.

In accordance with the Department of AHSS guidelines, I confirm that the word count of this thesis is less than 100,000 excluding the title page, contents acknowledgements, summary or abstract, abbreviations, footnotes, diagrams, maps, illustrations, tables, appendices, and references or bibliography.

Signed: _____

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christina Curran". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Date: Wednesday 7th June 2023

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List of Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AEN	Additional Educational Needs
ALC	Area Learning Community
ALN	Additional Learning Needs (Wales)
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
ASN	Additional Support Needs (Scotland)
ASSIA	Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts
BEd	Bachelor's Degree in Education
BEI	British Education Index
CA	Classroom Assistant
CACHE	Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education
CCEA	Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments
CCLD	Childcare, Learning and Development
CM	Catholic Maintained School
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CS	Controlled School
DE	Department of Education (NI)
DfE	Department for Education (England)
EA	Education Authority
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EAs	Educational Assistant
ELB	Education and Library Board
ERIC	Education Resources Information Centre
ETI	Education Training Inspectorate
FE	Further Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
IEP	Individualised Education Plan
IM	Irish Medium School
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LSA	Learning Support Assistant
LSC	Learning Support Co-ordinator
MaGS	Making a Good Start P1 Initiative
MLD	Moderate Learning Difficulties
NNEB	National Nursery Examination Board
NIA	Northern Ireland Assembly
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics Research and Agency
NITC	Northern Ireland Teaching Council
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OCR	Oxford Cambridge and RSA
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PLP	Personal Learning Plan
QTS	Qualified Teacher Status

SEBW	Social Emotional Behavioural and Well-being Needs
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator
SENDA	Special Educational Needs and Disability Act
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
TA	Teaching Assistant
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
UCL	University College London
UK	United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
VG	Voluntary Grammar

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Abstract

Little is known about the work of Classroom Assistants (CAs) supporting pupils with special educational needs (SEN) in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland (NI) despite the substantial increases in the employment of, and expenditure on, this workforce. The aim of this doctoral research is to investigate the experiences and perceptions of CAs employed in post-primary schools in NI to support pupils with SEN. A mixed method exploratory sequential study was conducted across a sample of 12 post-primary schools. The first phase featured a CA questionnaire which drew 78 responses. This was followed by a second phase of qualitative semi-structured telephone interviews with 19 CAs.

Findings indicate that the profile of assistants at post-primary level includes the employment and deployment of CAs with an uneven qualification and occupational background. The multi-faceted CA role has evolved to include the provision of a wide range of support, including significant levels of involvement in learning as well as pastoral, social, behavioural and organisational support for pupils with SEN. CAs offered wide ranging characterisations of their support roles, classroom practice and experience as paraprofessional members of the education workforce. Recommendations are offered for policy, practice, and further research.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.0 Chapter Outline

This introductory chapter presents the context, rationale and structure of doctoral research which aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of Classroom Assistants (CAs) employed in mainstream post-primary schools in Northern Ireland (NI) and their contribution to educational inclusion through support for pupils with statements of Special Educational Needs (SEN).

The research seeks to give voice to CAs as members of the paraprofessional workforce in education, originating from the researcher's own experiences over a three-year period working as a CA in the post-primary sector. Undertaking doctoral research offered the opportunity to extend understanding of this costly and expanding but under-represented and poorly understood group within the education workforce, and to make a timely contribution to the regional knowledge base. Over the last decade, the employment of assistants across mainstream school sectors has increased significantly by 71.5% to 15,093 posts, a level of resourcing almost doubling (91.1% increase) at post-primary level (Appendix one). The cost of CA provision is also steadily increasing; in 2019-2020, approximately a quarter (£76 million) of overall SEN expenditure (£311 million) was spent on the provision of CAs (NIAO, 2020).

This introduction chapter opens by providing an outline of CA support as a key facet of current SEN provision within the policy context of inclusive education. Justification for the research is rooted in the paucity of information about CAs regionally, specifically within the post-primary sector. The research aim and questions are stated as informed by the literature review, with an overview of the

research methodology. The chapter details the contribution to knowledge which this research makes and will conclude with the order of presentation for the thesis.

1.1 Research Context

In order to appreciate the relevance of this study in Northern Ireland, it is necessary to examine a number of contextual factors underpinning the research including the distinctive features of inclusive education, the regional context of Special Educational Needs and the Classroom Assistant workforce itself, its expansion and expenditure.

1.1.1 Inclusive Education

The education of children with SEN has changed significantly over the last five decades (O'Connor and Hansson, 2012; Griffith and Blatchford, 2021). Legislative and policy reforms originating from parental advocacy movements and societal reconceptualization of disability from a medical to a social model have led to a more equal and equitable rights-based agenda for inclusive education nationally and internationally (Frederickson and Cline, 2015; Silbermann, 2016).

Endorsed by international directives such as the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)* (1989), the *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* (1994) and the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)* (2006), educational policies have been reorientated towards the philosophy of inclusion, aiming to realise the ideals of maximising attendance, participation, and achievement for all children within mainstream or ordinary schools. Such directives have been implemented within national and regional legislation, mandating for education

systems based on equality of access, opportunity, and non-discrimination (Armstrong, 2008).

Internationally, education for pupils with SEN and disabilities has relied upon non-teaching support staff to facilitate a range of curricular, social, and environmental adaptations that support the increasingly diverse profile of pupils in mainstream classrooms (Giangreco, Suter and Doyle, 2010). The employment of assistants, mirroring the wider trend of the use of paraprofessional workers throughout public services (Bach, Kessler and Heron, 2006) supports both pupils and teachers in the processes of classroom inclusion. As a flexible staffing resource used fluidly to meet the individual needs of pupils (Graves, 2012; McLachlan, 2016; Lehane, 2016) CAs, as they are known in NI, are perceived to make a crucial contribution to the implementation of inclusion (Moran and Abbott, 2002; Abbott et al., 2011; O'Connor and Hansson, 2012).

1.1.2 Special Educational Needs in NI

Education for pupils with SEN is provided regionally through a system of parallel provision. At post-primary level, pupils with SEN can attend special schools, non-selective secondary schools and, increasingly, selective voluntary grammar schools (O'Connor et al., 2021). Regional legislation defines 'Special Educational Needs' as special educational provision relating to experience of a disability which *"prevents or hinders ... use of everyday educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of the same age in ordinary school"* or of a learning difficulty significantly greater than the majority of pupils of the same age (The Education (NI) Order 1996, Section 3(2)).

Historically, the legislative framework (*The Education (NI) Order 1996*, *The Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005*) strengthened the right of pupils with SEN to attend mainstream schools, aligned with parental preference, and contingent upon the compatible provision of efficient education for all pupils. *The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Education Needs* (DE, 1998) provided statutory guidance standardising practice and provision for the benefit of schools, parents, and pupils. ‘Special educational provision’ is defined as “*educational provision, which is different from, or additional to, the provision made generally for children of comparable age*” (DE, 1998, 1). The Code of Practice outlined a five-phased framework to recognise and meet the needs of pupils through school-based (stage one and two), external (stage three) and specialist (stage four and five) provision, including withdrawal support and additional classroom support provided by a CA.

Regionally, educational policy for SEN has been under a protracted and incomplete review since 2006 (NICCY, 2020), costing an estimated £3.6million (NIAO, 2020; NI Assembly, 2021). To date, this long-drawn-out and costly review remains unfinished with many of the proposals withdrawn due to financial constraints, political instability, and public pressure for significant revision (Purdy, Hunter and Totton, 2020; NICCY 2020). Recent legislative reform through the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA, 2016) proposed a revision of the regional SEN framework, extending the educational rights of pupils and their parents and enhancing provision through a suite of amendments including subordinate legislation¹, a revised Code of Practice and a programme of training for

¹At the time of writing public consultations of the new draft SEN regulations are ongoing. Consultation on the draft Code of Practice (2022) has been completed with implementation paused by CO-VID19 and the closure of schools from March 2020.

school staff. Despite incoming reform, practice and provision for SEN in NI schools continued to be challenged by ‘a myriad of issues preventing children from enjoying their rights to an effective education’ (NICCY, 2020, 3). Such issues have become increasingly visible over the duration of this research, including the increased prevalence of SEN, political instability impacting regional government, and operational difficulties at all levels of SEN provision (NIAO, 2017; 2020; NICCY, 2020, NI Assembly 2021).

Added to this, over the period March 2020 to September 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic caused severe disruption to the education and care of children and young people on a global scale. The pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated the already challenging SEN policy and practice context regionally, delaying implementation of the SENDA reforms and creating unanticipated challenges in the education of pupils with SEN. Research (Lindner et al., 2021; Couper-Kenney and Riddell, 2021; NCB, 2021, Purdy, 2021) acknowledges the significance of the disruption to educational services of pupils with SEN including the challenges of remote learning and home schooling over the 2020 – 2021 period (Burke and Dempsey, 2020; O’Connor et al., 2021a).

Relevant participatory research undertaken by the National Children’s Bureau (NCB, 2021) highlighted the wide-ranging impacts of COVID-19 on the wellbeing and education of children and young people with SEN and disabilities, including experiences of heightened anxiety and stress; isolation; loneliness; reduced parental and carer support; disrupted routines; separation of families; as well as reduced access to respite services. It is suggested that children and young people have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, with a ‘double disadvantage’

for children with SEN and disabilities, who were perceived to have been ‘forgotten about’ or ‘left to their own devices’ (NCB, 2021, 63).

Additionally, the research reported the views of parents and young people on the impact of supervised learning, the removal of learning supports and the challenges of remote learning for pupils, foregrounding the role of classroom assistants.

“They are not accessing their classroom assistant, because their classroom assistant is being used to supervise classes, because of staff shortages. But... if they don’t have a classroom assistant guiding them, they are not doing the work. So, they are just sitting in school” (NCB, 2021, 47).

1.1.3 Classroom Assistants in NI

“The support staff is seen as an important part of the inclusion team. When used effectively Classroom Assistants can make a meaningful difference to inclusion” (DE, 2011, 8).

The term CA is one of many used across jurisdictions of the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally to describe the use of an additional adult within a classroom setting. Defined regionally, the remit of the CA is outlined in job descriptions (Appendix two) as one of ‘educational support and care’ (EA, 2021). Adult assistance in the classroom, supplementary to classroom teaching by a qualified class or subject teacher, is conceptualised as one of the key mechanisms of inclusive provision for all pupils (Abbott and Moran, 2002; Abbott et al., 2011; O’Connor and Hansson, 2012). The role is described nationally through a wide range of titles reflecting the ad-hoc development of this type of support and the diverse nature of

the duties prescribed (Clayton, 1993; Grey, 2007; Webster and de Boer, 2021). Table 1.1 highlights the range of terms used across the UK schools. A plethora of additional role titles can be added to this reflecting international usage and the diversity of classroom support roles, such as ‘teacher aides’ in Australia (Bourke and Carrington, 2007; Harris and Aprile, 2015) ‘paraprofessionals’ or ‘paraeducators’ in the US (Carter et al., 2008; Giangreco, Suter and Doyle, 2010; Causton-Theoharis, 2014) and ‘educational assistants’ in Canada (Bennett et al., 2021).

Additional Support Assistant	Learning Auxiliary
Behaviour Support Assistant	Nursery Nurse
Bilingual Support Assistant	Pupil Support Assistant
Bilingual Teaching Assistant	School Assistant
Classroom Assistant	School Auxiliary
Classroom Assistant – SEN	SEN Auxiliary
Classroom Assistant – ASN	SEN Teaching Assistant
Classroom Supervisor	Senior Teaching Assistant
Cover Assistant	Special Needs Assistant
Cover Supervisor	Student Support Coordinator
Curriculum and Resource Assistant	Supervisory Assistant
Domestic Assistant	Support for Learning Assistant
Higher Level Teaching Assistant	Teaching Assistant
Inclusion Support Assistant	Teaching and Learning Assistant
Learning Assistant	Welfare Assistant

Table 1.1 Role titles used to describe classroom support roles in the UK.

It is difficult to trace the distinct educational policy roots of the employment of assistants in Northern Ireland. Their existence in the classroom before 2000 is often only implicitly referenced in SEN policy which stresses the importance of training for ‘support’ or ‘non-teaching’ staff (DE, 1998: 2005; 2011; 2022). ETI

inspection reports evidence effectiveness, good practice and positive contributions of CAs through local initiatives such as Making a Good Start (MaGS) which allocated funding for Primary 1 classes for additional physical and personnel resources as an investment in early years provision (ETI, 1998; 2002). A report of the MaGS initiative found evidence of effectiveness of the initiative with approximately 60% of schools evaluated as good or excellent (ETI, 1998). While the report cited ‘initial apprehension’ and ‘confusion over roles’ amongst teachers, the inspectorate highlighted the importance of CA contributions to pupil learning in early years’ classrooms (ibid, 7). Within this context, good practice was characterised as effective deployment of assistants by teachers, achieving a balance between direct involvement in pupil learning and routine clerical duties; good use of CA skills and expertise; involvement in planning with teachers; high levels of uptake of NVQ qualifications for CAs; and induction (ibid).

“... with few exceptions, the teachers recognise the improved learning opportunities which can be provided where ... teaching skills are enhanced by the support of a qualified and competent CA” (ETI, 1998, 12).

Concurrently, with the implementation of the Code of Practice (DE, 1998), CAs were employed as a targeted provision for the support of pupils with SEN of all ages, in both mainstream and special settings in line with accommodations set out in the original five-stage approach. This guidance (DE, 1998) and its expectant revision (DE, 2022) do not explicitly address the processes or procedures for deployment and practice of adult assistants in schools. A further inspection survey (ETI, 2002) which evaluated the effectiveness of CA support for pupils with statements of SEN in primary and post-primary settings found that while CAs provided crucial support for

inclusion and made a significant contribution to pupil participation and achievement, there was a need for systemic improvement.

“Good practice was not found to be commonplace in schools as some schools failed to use their CAs effectively. In some instances, the CAs need more meaningful guidance on their role to help ensure their effectiveness” (ETI, 2002, 15).

Importantly, this survey acknowledged the challenge of including pupils with statements of SEN within the post-primary environment, within the more complex systems of subject teachers, departmental and management structures. For such pupils the interaction of a wide range of academic and social factors led to reliance on CA support to negotiate the school day successfully (ETI, 2002). Such complexity required teamwork, training and co-ordination in order to bring about meaningful educational experiences for pupils. The report concluded that there was an urgent need for training for teachers and CAs, and the development of a written job description and guidance for CAs (ETI, 2002). Moreover, the supplement to the Code of Practice (DE, 2005) reinforced the importance of collaborative working between teachers and CAs.

Where a child’s statement specifies, they should receive support from a CA, the assistant must be allowed into the classroom. Reasonable steps can be taken to ensure the teacher and CA work effectively together and support each other” (DE, 2005, 55).

On a local level, the evolution of the CA role was necessitated by an episode of protracted industrial action led by the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) trade union, taking action on a twelve-year dispute with Education and

Library Boards (ELBs) over job descriptions, pay and conditions. Discussion of this issue was taken up within the NI Assembly on 19th June 2007 for resolution by the then Education Minister Caitriona Ruane through the provision of a £30 million settlement.

“Over the years, classroom assistants have been used. Their case has been like a football, kicked between the Education and Library Boards and the Department of Education. Today, all members agree that classroom assistants, who do wonderful work, and do it well, deserved to be recognised... People on whom our children depend every day of the week, and on whom teachers and principals depend for the help that is required to give our children, and especially those with special needs, the best education and care possible. The work that CAs do cannot be counted in pounds, that work has not been recognised either in the past or by the Chamber today”
(Bradley, 2007).

At resolution, with a negotiated £15 million buy-out for CAs, the role was regraded into differentiated levels of pupil support with an agreement that a further review of the education workforce would address the issues of qualifications, pay structures, terms and conditions, and career development for CAs (EA, 2008). It is unclear if this review has ever taken place. The range of roles within adult assistance were graded as follows:

Supervisory Assistant	General Assistant II
Nursery Assistant	CA-SEN
General Assistant	CA-ASN

Table 1.2 Adult Assistant roles in NI

Consequently, guidance on the use of assistants was developed by each of the ELBs (BELB, 2007; NEELB, 2011) prior to the establishment of the Education Authority (EA) in 2015. The guidance, as a draft policy, underscored the supplementary remit of CA support for pupils aligned to work alongside the class teacher within the GTCNI Teacher Competency Framework (GTCNI, 2007) and the DE Resource File for Children with SEN (DE, 2011). *“At all times, Classroom Assistants are to work under the direction of and in partnership with the teacher”* (DE, 2011, 19) with responsibility on the teacher to deploy, organise and guide the work of other adults to support pupils’ learning, when appropriate (GTCNI, 2007).

Job descriptions outlining the specifications for each CA role (EA, 2021) are included in Appendix two. In all, there are six grades of adult support roles. Of particular interest to this research are three roles which support the care and education of pupils with statements of SEN, namely, General Assistant II, CA-SEN and CA-ASN. Each role is pupil-focused, working under the direction of a qualified teacher inside and outside the classroom. Commonalities within the roles include the supervisory nature of additional support and the provision of personal care, such as feeding and toileting. The personnel specification for all grades requires a level of previous paid or voluntary experience, ranging from three months to one year within a school setting. Basic knowledge requirements for these roles include an understanding of the CA role, child protection and safeguarding, health and safety and use of school-based ICT programmes. In addition, flexibility, communication, and teamwork skills are essential for employment in a CA role. At present, there is no requirement for a SEN-specific qualification or training for a CA post.

Analysis of role descriptions highlight differences in the duties CAs are expected to undertake at different grade levels, reflecting the higher levels of support

provided for pupils with SEN. The duties of the General Assistant (GA) are non-curricular in nature, focused on medical support and care. Specific duties include personal care, pupil safety and support for pupil mobility, feeding and cleaning. Additional requirements of the post include complex or invasive medical procedures.

The CA-SEN and CA-ASN roles share a common remit of educational support and care through the provision of three categories of support: general classroom support, special classroom support and administration. General classroom support relates to pupil learning and assisting the teacher in the management of the learning environment. Explicit learning support duties include clarifying and explaining instruction; ensuring the pupils are able to use equipment and materials provided; assisting in motivating and encouraging the pupil; assisting in areas requiring reinforcement or development; promoting the independence of pupils to enhance learning; helping pupil(s) stay on work set; and meeting physical/medical needs as required whilst encouraging independence (EA, 2021).

In addition, CA-SEN and CA-ASN roles contribute to the inclusion of pupils in mainstream schools through the provision of special classroom support. CAs employed at both grades are expected to develop an understanding of the specific needs of the child, to assist with the delivery of individualised programmes, promote access to the curriculum, and undertake personal care, non-invasive medical duties, and behaviour management (ibid). Administrative duties include classroom administration, maintaining pupil records, regular feedback with teachers, photocopying and resource management. A further section of additional special classroom support duties, undertaken by CA-ASN include invasive medical duties, specialist support for communication or sensory differences, and supporting pupils with challenging behaviour (ibid). Additional requirements are outlined for CA-SEN

and CA-ASN posts which include a level 2 qualification in childcare, the latter post requiring GCSE qualifications as desirable criteria. Additionally, both roles require previous experience supporting pupils with SEN, knowledge of child development and skills in collaborative working (ibid).

A recent survey of Special Educational Needs in mainstream schools (ETI, 2019), arising from the NIAO (2017), synthesised evidence from inspections of twenty primary and ten post-primary schools over the period January to March 2018. While a full evaluation of SEN provision was inhibited due to industrial action by the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council (NITC), evidence of highly effective provision for SEN was characterised by 'skilled and motivated teaching and support staff' (ETI, 2019, 1). Case study exemplars highlighted a wide interpretation of CA deployment styles and duties within post-primary classrooms including as a lesson monitor, CAs observing pupils' in lessons, CA on the SEN team providing withdrawal and in-class support, a CA on the senior leadership team, and another school deploying 'a CA always available in the small teaching room to support the pupil and de-escalate problems quickly should they arise' (ETI, 2019, 27). In addition, this report also notes the practice of schools to employ teachers and other support staff roles (youth worker, learning mentor and specialist teacher) as an alternative to the allocation of CA hours to individual pupils to enhance local provision. The revised draft of the Code of Practice (DE, 2022) adds little in the way of clarification on the deployment or nature of CA support, reaffirming ambiguities inherent in support work and a wide scale of implementation within each classroom context:

“Adult Assistance (for the purposes of SEN): Working under the direction of the LSC [Learning Support Co-ordinator] and teachers, adult assistants

should have a clear understanding of their role and responsibilities in the classroom with regard to individual or groups of children with SEN in the classroom. The adult assistant is a key contributor in supporting the teacher through the delivery of targeted strategies and interventions as set out in a child's Pupil Learning Profile (PLP). Given that close involvement in supporting the teachers, the training needs of the adult assistants in the school should be identified and factored into the SEN action plan and the School Development Plan. Schools should reference DE and EA guidance on the management, deployment and development of assistants" (DE, 2022, paragraph 2.52).

Most recently, a study commissioned by UNISON and completed by researchers at University College London (UCL) Institute of Education throughout the 2021 lockdown period, examined the changing role of Teaching Assistants (TAs) and CAs during the pandemic. Interestingly, this was the first time that CAs working in NI schools were invited to participate in UK-based research focused on assistants in education. The study highlighted issues within regional school workforce statistics, as well as low response rates from NI (n=247; 2.7%). The findings suggest TAs and CAs played a crucial role to the functioning of schools during this period and characterised this workforce as 'the unsung heroes of this pandemic' (Moss et al., 2021, 28).

While the low response rate of CAs in NI reduces the applicability of the findings of this research for NI practitioners, it provides a rare insight into supervised classrooms during this period. Discrete findings identify that TAs and CAs contributed to lockdown learning arrangements through the provision of support to vulnerable and key worker children in schools (88%), management of a whole class

or bubble on their own (51%) and covering staff absences (49%). Over a third of TAs/CAs (39%) reported that they had fewer opportunities to support the pupils they were most concerned about (Moss et al., 2021). In addition, TAs and CAs contributed to remote learning through the creation of resources (39%), liaison with families (36%), participation in remote lessons (31%), and support for individual pupils through remote learning (27%). As frontline workers, the report notes that the assumption of additional classroom support duties including cleaning of school equipment and furniture (84%), maintaining pupil social distancing measures (83%) and close contact with pupils were considered by participants as high-risk activities (ibid). The authors conclude with the recommendation of greater recognition of the work of assistants within the school community and investment in support staff as a rich local-resource base with a critical role in educational recovery programmes.

“TA/CAs are the mortar in the brickwork of our schools. Much of what schools achieve would be unimaginable without them, yet all too often their work goes unnoticed and unremarked. This survey has highlighted quite how much TA/CAs have done at this difficult time to keep schools functioning. One good outcome from the crisis would be if TA/CAs were more fully and deliberately involved in a national conversation about education going forward... Certainly, much more purpose and thought must be given at the policy level to their role and contribution. TA/CAs deserve no less if their value and potential is to be realised” (Moss et al., 2021, 30).

1.1.4 The Growth of the CA Workforce

Empirical research on the work of classroom support staff has proliferated in the last three decades, mirroring substantial increases in the employment of assistants

internationally (Giangreco, Suter and Doyle, 2010; Sharma and Salend, 2016; Rose, 2020; Webster and de Boer, 2021). Statistical data on the number of assistants employed within the educational workforce in Northern Ireland, presented in Table 1.3, is not currently included within the published school workforce data. This data was collated by request under Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOI) over the period of doctoral study (Appendix one). Echoing international trends, the number of CAs employed in NI schools has increased by 71.5% over the ten-year period 2011 – 2021. While there has been considerable growth within the primary sector (64%), this research is interested in the post-primary phase, which traditionally employs smaller numbers of classroom-based support staff. Regional data suggests that over the last decade the number of assistants employed in post-primary schools has almost doubled, increasing by 91.14% from 2371 in 2011/12 to 4532 CAs in 2020/21.

	Primary CAs	Post-Primary CAs	Total CA Workforce
2011/12	6428	2371	8799
2012/13	6804	2613	9417
2013/14	7219	2738	9957
2014/15	7607	2918	10525
2015/16	7952	2999	10951
2016/17	8178	3144	11322
2017/18	8722	3396	12118
2018/19	8848	3513	12361
2019/20	9910	4125	14035
2020/21	10561	4532	15093

Table 1.3 CA Workforce Growth 2011/12 to 2020/21. Data obtained through FOI Request.

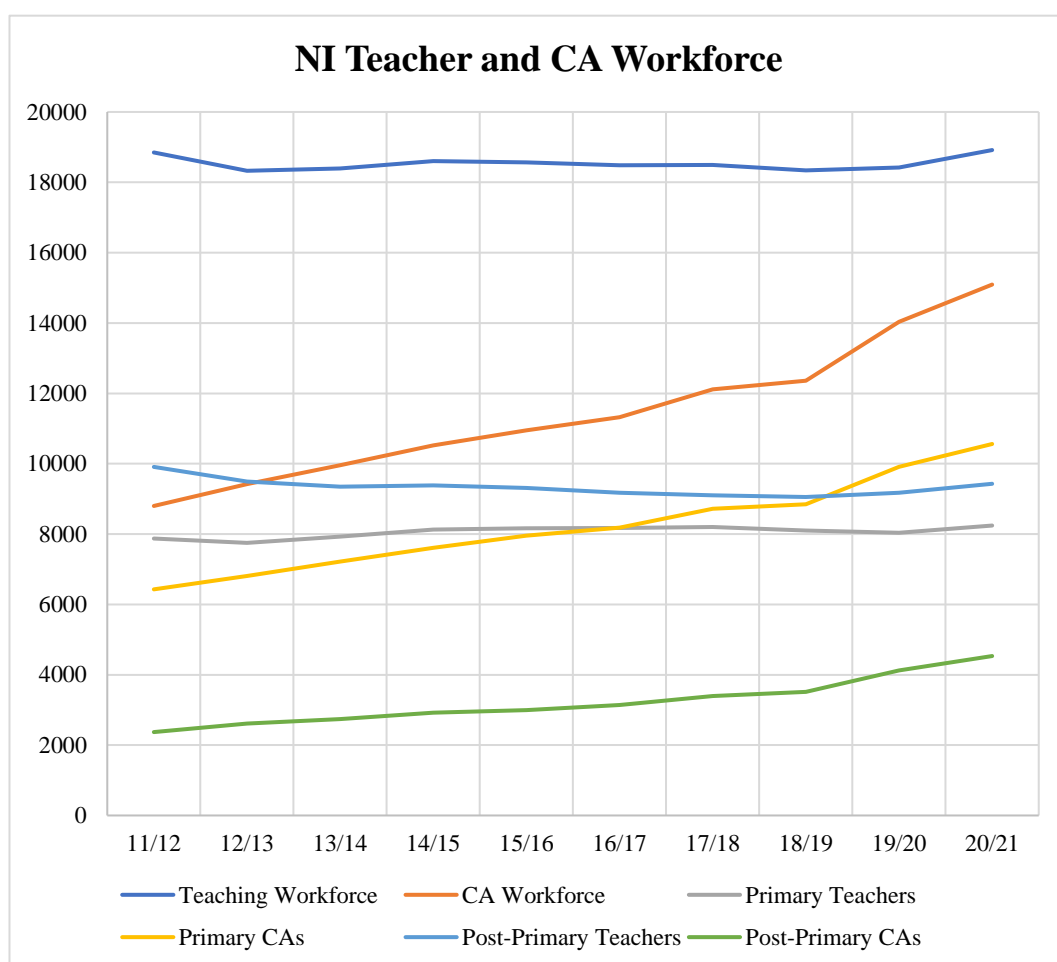


Figure 1.1 NI Teacher and CA Workforce Change 2011/12 to 2020/21. Data obtained through FOI and NISRA, 2021.

The employment of assistants is tied closely with trends in the teaching workforce². In England, the employment and deployment of TAs was of central concern to the workforce reform agenda in England and Wales which aimed to redress issues in teacher recruitment and retention (Cajkler et al., 2007; Tucker, 2009; Basford et al., 2017). While this has not been an issue in the Northern Ireland context, it is important to align these posts within the wider education workforce. Figure 1.1 contrasts the CA workforce with data on the growth of teaching staff in NI (NISRA, 2021), suggesting that the educational workforce as a whole has expanded significantly, with an opening up of roles on a strictly paraprofessional basis firmly attached to the inclusion agenda. This data serves to reinforce the argument that in NI as elsewhere the employment of CA support has become *the* model of choice for education systems worldwide, a trend which has been observed as replicating itself more successfully than any other inclusive model (Webster and de Boer, 2021). While traditionally smaller than that of their primary counterparts, the CA workforce in the post-primary sector has grown substantially in NI over the last decade, almost doubling over the period 2011/12 to 2020/21. Over this time, the ratio of teachers to CAs has changed significantly, with a decrease in the ratio from 0.24:1 in 2011/12 (1 CA to four teachers) to 0.48:1 in 2021 (1 CA to 2 teachers) at post-primary level. This shift has implications for teacher classroom practice, for the educational experience of pupils as well as the levels of expenditure on SEN support regionally.

² Data on the size of the NI teaching workforce is accessed through the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

1.1.5 The Cost of Classroom Assistants

The cost of Classroom Assistance is now a significant expenditure. A key consideration within much policy and research is value for money. This is increasingly pertinent in relation to the assistant workforce. Much empirical research seeks to measure and evaluate the impact and effectiveness of CA support (Alborz et al., 2009; Blatchford et al., 2012; Roffey-Barentsen and Watt, 2014; Sharples et al., 2015). Recent evaluations by the NI Audit Office (NIAO) of the growing costs of SEN provision estimated the total EA expenditure on special needs provision to be £311 million in 2019/20 (NIAO, 2020). Of this total, it reported that £76 million was spent on the provision of CAs, representing a doubling in cost since 2011-2012 (ibid) and evidencing significant increases in expenditure at both primary (109%) and post-primary (82.4%) levels. Information on this expenditure has been tabulated in Table 1.4.

	2011 - 12	2019 – 20	% Increase
Total Expenditure	£39 million	£76 million	94.8%
Primary CAs	£22 million	£ 46 million	109%
Post-Primary CAs	£17 million	£ 31 million	82.4%

Table 1.4 Expenditure of Classroom Assistants 2011-12 to 2019-20, adapted from NIAO analysis of EA management information (2020, 35).

The rising cost of SEN provision, including assistant support, has been noted in other jurisdictions. TAs in England make up almost one-third of the education workforce (DfE, 2021). Over a similar period, the employment of TAs in English schools has increased by 22.5% to 271,370 TAs in 2020/21 (DfE, 2021), with support

staff accounting for 15% of the overall education budget (Andrews, 2020). Similar concerns have been voiced in the Republic of Ireland through the evaluation of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme (NCSE, 2018; Griffith and Blatchford, 2021; Zhao et al., 2021). The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Comprehensive Review of the SNA Scheme (NCSE, 2018) outlined that the 35% increase in the number of SNA posts (from 10,320 in 2011/12 to 13,969 in 2017/18) had increased expenditure to €476 million in 2017 (ibid).

The provision of classroom assistance across the UK and Republic of Ireland is, therefore, a costly investment. Its effectiveness as a resource for supporting pupils with SEN is increasingly facing financial scrutiny and public interest. This is arguably true of the assistant workforce in Northern Ireland, with claims that the current funding model for SEN provision is unsustainable (NI Assembly, 2021), and both the Department of Education (DE) and the Education Authority (EA) unable to demonstrate value for money in terms of the economy, efficiency, or effectiveness of SEN provision in mainstream schools (NIAO, 2017).

The issue of the value for money has recently been foregrounded within a review of SEN policy by the NI Assembly Public Accounts Committee (Beggs, 2020) in which anecdotal evidence about the work of CAs in post-primary classrooms drew attention to the need for further scrutiny of deployment models and the management of CAs. The comment of a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) illustrates changing discourse on the value of assistants at government level, and the urgent need for investigation of this workforce at post-primary level.

“I once spoke to a classroom assistant who had experience at primary school level but had taken a post at a secondary school. She expressed her

frustration at standing at the back of a classroom, sometimes with multiple classroom assistants, doing nothing and waiting for something to happen. In fact, she could not hack it: she gave up the job and went back to the primary school where she was intervening and felt that she was contributing. Do you think that that is still happening, and, if so, does it show value for money? Of course, it is not value for money if a classroom assistant is standing at the back of a class not being gainfully employed and cannot hack it to the extent that they leave.... You have decided only now to look at the model for classroom assistants. Hundreds of millions of pounds have been spent on it” (Beggs, 2020).

Recurrent criticism of SEN funding (NIAO, 2017; House of Commons, 2019; NICCY, 2020; NI Assembly, 2021) has fuelled calls for an independent review of SEN processes, policies, and procedures to assess if current services and processes are fit for purpose. This long-awaited independent review of SEN is currently underway (DE, 2022), to be completed over a six-month period. Crucially, the review includes an examination of the impact of classroom assistance on pupil outcomes. Across the UK, alternative perspectives (Graves, 2013, Clarke, 2021) seek to challenge the assessment of this workforce as representing low value, highlighting the difficulty of quantifying the contribution of CA support beyond measures of pupil academic outcomes. The researchers assert that CAs are undervalued for the money they represent. Whilst it is not within the scope of this research to assess the impact or value of CA support, it nonetheless aims to provide a timely and relevant description of the experiences and perceptions of CAs as professionals within a challenging political, economic and practice context, at a critical juncture in COVID-19 recovery and in the midst of a long-awaited implementation process of reform.

1.2 Rationale

The rationale for this research is rooted in a number of interrelated and timely issues within the Northern Irish educational landscape. While there is abundant, emerging research on the role of assistants in education, with notable international contributions (Giangreco, Suter and Doyle, 2010; Blatchford et al., 2012; Sharma and Salend, 2016; Webster and de Boer, 2021), the concept of adult assistance is an under-researched area in regional context. The profile of CAs in NI represents a particular gap in research and policy across the British Isles. In comparison with the other nations, with TAs in England and Wales, Pupil Support Assistants (PSAs) in Scotland, as well as Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) or Inclusion Support Assistants (ISAs) in the Republic of Ireland, little is currently known about CAs and their employment in this jurisdiction.

With the notable exception of a small number of published studies of significance (McGarvey et al., 1996; Moran and Abbott, 2002; Moran and Abbott, 2006; Grey et al., 2007; Abbott et al., 2011, O'Connor and Hansson, 2012; O'Connor et al., 2017; 2020), previous regional research has focused on the primary and the special school sectors or has utilised cross-phase samples. Therefore, there has been limited inquiry into the work of CAs at post-primary level. This is worthy of note as concern is often voiced by parents, practitioners, and policy makers about the nature of CA support in post-primary for pupils with statements of SEN (NICCY 2008; NICCY, 2020).

Furthermore, few studies have involved CAs as participants. In the main, local studies have prioritised the perspectives of school leaders (Moran and Abbott, 2002; 2006), SENCOs (Moran and Abbott, 2006; Abbott et al., 2011) and teachers

(McGarvey et al., 1996; Doherty, 2004; Grey, 2007) creating a gap in understanding from the perspective of the assistant. This research thus seeks to create the opportunity for a better understanding of the CA role from the perspective for the CA themselves, reflecting the realities of their lived experience at ‘the chalkface of inclusion’ (Lehane, 2018, 12).

Moreover, this research is both timely and important due to the significance and scale of the current issues within SEN policy and provision in NI. As outlined (section 1.1.2) the SEN framework has been under review and reform regionally since 2006. In this context, there has been limited examination of CAs as members of the education workforce. This research is viewed as a worthwhile endeavour as before policy reform can be implemented, it is essential to gain a better understanding of the CA role in post-primary settings in order to inform decision making about this key resource. Research on CAs is particularly necessary, opportune, and relevant within the regional context. Investment in the workforce has not been matched with research or evaluation of this element of SEN policy (O’Connor et al., 2021b). The deployment of CA support currently operates in a policy vacuum with limited guidance on their role and work in supporting pupils with SEN, particularly at post-primary level. There is, thus, an urgent need to examine the work of CAs and their contribution to education for pupils with statements of SEN.

Finally, on a personal level, the study originated from the researcher’s experiences as a CA within a post-primary setting in NI and represents the singular developmental opportunity of a former CA seeking to add the CA voice to current discourse.

1.3 Research Aim and Questions

Informed by the pre-empirical review of research and policy literature, the research aim and questions are presented. These have, in turn, directed the research design and methodology outlined in Chapter Three.

The aim of the research is to *investigate the experiences and perceptions of CAs employed in post-primary schools to support pupils with SEN in Northern Ireland.*

The aim will be addressed through the following research questions:

1. How do CAs describe and characterise their classroom support role in post-primary settings?
2. How do CAs prepare for their role in post-primary settings?
3. What are CA perceptions of their conditions of employment as paraprofessionals within the educational workforce?
4. What does this research tell us about the contribution of CAs in supporting pupils with statements of SEN in post-primary settings?

To address these questions a sequential, exploratory mixed method design, incorporating two phases, was adopted as the most appropriate approach within the parameters of doctoral research. The first phase of the research was the design, collection and analysis of an online questionnaire survey for CAs employed in 12 post-primary schools across four Area Learning Communities (ALCs) in NI. This initial stage informed the design and development of the second phase, a series of semi-structured telephone interviews with 19 Classroom Assistants. The integration of the quantitative survey data with qualitative interview data provided breadth and depth, producing a multi-faceted and detailed insight into the perceptions and

experiences of CAs. The result is a rich informative account of CAs' experiences and their own perceptions, as yet un-examined, of their paraprofessional role in supporting SEN pupils in post-primary settings.

1.4 Contribution to Knowledge

Whilst some of the findings of this study align with existing national and international research in the field, the contribution to knowledge lies in the depth of information provided by the mixed methods sequential exploratory approach and the interpretation and articulation of the CA voice in the NI post-primary context.

This research makes a timely, robust and significant contribution to local knowledge and understanding of CAs as paraprofessional members of the education workforce and their contribution to SEN provision and inclusive education, thereby adding the voice of practitioners to both regional and international discourse.

Moreover, the research was undertaken at an unprecedented juncture for education and the role of assistants prior to the implementation of the SENDA (2016) reforms and in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Further reflection on the contribution to knowledge is presented in section 7.2.

1.5 Thesis Outline

The study is structured in seven chapters. Chapter One has established the context, rationale and focus of the doctoral thesis. A clear rationale for the research was provided with reference to the dearth of regional research on the work of CAs despite the sizable growth of, and expenditure on this particular workforce. The research aim and questions were presented, together with the contribution made by the study.

Chapter Two will present a review of the policy and research literature which foreground the thesis. The chapter opens with an overview of Special Educational Needs and the development of the CA role. Following this, a critical review of international research literature is presented on the interconnected themes of the CA role, preparation and conditions of employment. It then examines the ‘emerging’ field of CA research with educational studies (Sharma and Salend, 2016, 118) providing an outline of the theoretical framework underpinning the research. The chapter concludes by highlighting the gaps in regional research and providing justification for this study.

Chapter Three provides a detailed description of the philosophical orientation, design and conduct of the research, including an overview and justification of the methodologies undertaken. The chapter presents an exploration of the philosophical underpinnings of the research, and the research design, strategy and sample are explained. This chapter will outline the sequential phases of data collection, exploring the online questionnaire and the semi-structured telephone interviews undertaken as part of the mixed methods approach. The final section of

the chapter will explore a range of ethical and validity issues within the research process.

The findings of the study will be reported across two chapters. Chapter Four will report the quantitative findings of the online questionnaire. It presents the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire survey. Chapter Five will present a thematic analysis of the qualitative findings from a series of semi-structured telephone interviews with CAs.

Chapter Six presents a discussion of the key research findings synthesised from the previous two chapters. The findings are related to regional, national and international research literature in order to address the research questions. This chapter is organised thematically around the core themes of ‘the evolving role of CAs’ and ‘membership of the educational community’. Chapter Seven concludes the thesis, drawing this investigation to a close with an assessment of the contribution to knowledge made and the limitations of the study. It will also offer recommendations for policy, practice, and future research and details the dissemination of the research.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has presented an introductory summary of the main components of the study. It has provided the context and rationale for the research focusing on the CAs’ perceptions of their support for pupils with SEN in post-primary settings. It has stated the aim of the research and the research questions to be addressed and, in doing so, it has illuminated the gap which this study seeks to address. The following chapter will present a review of the literature underpinning this research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.0 Chapter Outline

This structured literature review aims to establish the grounding for the current study, providing a synthesis of the international research field and of national policy and practice on the work of CAs.³ It positions the study within the field of enquiry, exploring what is known as well as what is currently not fully understood, and in doing so illuminating the knowledge gaps this research aims to address. As such the review serves as a foundation piece, developing the conceptual framework for knowledge creation, and informing the methodological approach and research design (Atkins and Wallace, 2012).

A focused search was undertaken across a range of electronic databases including ASSIA, BEI, ERIC, PsychINFO, Scopus and Google Scholar. The searches were guided by a key term strategy utilising Boolean logic. Search terms included ‘Classroom Assistant (CA), Teaching Assistant (TA), Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Learning Support Assistant (LSA), Paraeducator, Paraprofessional, Teacher Aide, Educational Assistant (EAs) or aide’, and ‘workforce, occupation or training, and inclusion, mainstream,’ or ‘Special Educational Needs (SEN)’. The searches were limited to English language publications over the period 1998 to 2021 and prioritised peer reviewed literature. To address potential publication bias, searches were supplemented with hand search methods for relevant sources including books, book chapters, conference papers, policy, and grey literature. Hand search methods were undertaken through examination of reference lists of relevant publications, local library searches, and searches of relevant organisational and

³ A wide range of role titles are referenced in this chapter reflecting usage in international research. Where relevant the main role titles are used throughout for example, CA in NI, TA or LSA in England and Wales, and paraprofessional in the USA reflecting usage in literature.

institutional repositories, including the Department of Education (DE), Education Authority (EA), Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and NI Assembly (NIA).

Empirical literature was sought which examined the role of CAs within the post-primary context, and that elicited the voices of CAs as participants. Relevant studies were organised thematically for analysis. This chapter will present a review of the theoretical, empirical and policy literature which foreground the study. The chapter opens with an overview of the concept of Special Educational Needs. The historical development of the role of assistants in education is explored through a synthesis of grey and empirical literature. The chapter then examines the evolving role of the CA and its visibility within international educational research (Sharma and Salend, 2016). The chapter concludes with an overview of the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

2.1 Special Educational Needs and the Role of Assistants

This section presents a brief overview of the theoretical origins of SEN and disability over the last five decades which continue to influence educational philosophy, policy, and practice. Finally, the section details the historical development of the CA role within these inter-related concepts.

2.1.1 The concept of Special Educational Needs

“We wish to see a more positive approach, and we have adopted the concept of Special Educational Needs, seen not in terms of a particular disability which a child may be judged to have, but in relation to everything about him, his abilities as well as his disabilities - indeed all the factors which have a bearing on his educational progress” (DES, 1978, 37).

The concept of Special Educational Needs originated from the work of Ron Gulliford (1971), made subsequently more prominent within *the Report of the Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People* (The Warnock Report) (DES, 1978). The terminology, developed as an alternative to the contemporary classification of handicap (Gulliford and Upton, 2003), provided welcome reform to the language and discourse of disability (Purdy, Hunter, and Totton, 2020), and improved the quality of special education provision (Webster, 2019) within a more equitable framework of needs-based provision for all children, some of whom had been previously viewed as uneducable (Hodkinson, 2019). The term ‘Special Educational Needs’ was proposed as a general framework which aimed to avoid stigmatisation and provided a useful description of a pupil’s educational needs and associated provision (DES, 1978), redirecting the attention of educators from the perceived deficits of some pupils, onto the common educational needs of all children.

The concept of SEN emerged at a point of intersection between shifting societal understandings of disability and difference. Since the 1970s, evolving models of disability have advanced from a range of perspectives, each adding useful contributions and criticisms to the emerging fields of special and inclusive education, and disability studies. The early dominant psycho-medical model of disability, inherited from the fields of medicine and psychology proposed an understanding of disability as a limitation in the normal functioning of an individual and was focused on biological or psychological deficits (Hodkinson, 2019). The traditional response to disability within this paradigm was through therapeutic intervention, segregated services, and residential housing (Mason, 2008). Within this model, SEN is perceived to be caused by ‘*deficits in the neurological or psychological make-up of*

the child, analogous to an illness or medical condition' (Skidmore, 1996, 34). It is posited that such differences should be assessed, diagnosed, and cured by clinical intervention, treatment, or rehabilitation (Oliver, 1990; Frederickson and Cline, 2015). While this model is heavily critiqued by more progressive understandings of the experience of disability in modern society (Oliver, 1990), there is some contention that the current systems of identification and assessment of SEN, as well as the discourse of remedial education and intervention, are still commonplace.

“Developmental and functional norms are employed as a process of developmental screening and assessment of a pupil suspected of having SEND. By comparing a pupil’s performance with the typical performance of other pupils of a similar age across a range of areas, such as cognition, speech and language, fine and gross motor skills, and social and emotional functioning, the scope and severity of a pupil’s SEND might be determined” (Hodkinson, 2019, 42).

The traditional medical understanding of disability was subsequently challenged by a social definition, which offered a reversal in explanatory models of causation from the personal to the collective, with an emphasis on the interaction between an individual and their physical, social, and attitudinal environment (Johnstone, 2012). Impairment was defined as socially constructed by a disablist and disabling society and its failure to accommodate difference (Frederickson and Cline, 2015). This model, emerging within the disability movement, shifted discourse from the personal tragedy theory to the redefinition of disability as a form of social oppression. It challenged the perceived medical orthodoxy for its inability to account for the wider situational and experiential components of disability and the reliance

on responses ‘designed by able-bodied people through a process over which disabled people have no control’ (Oliver, 1990, 6).

“All disabled people experience disability as a social restriction, whether those restrictions occur as a consequence of inaccessible built environment, questionable notions of intelligence and social competence, the inability of the general population to use sign language, the lack of reading material in braille or hostile public attitudes to people with non-visible disabilities”
(Oliver, 1990, xiv).

Within the social model of disability, SEN is understood as an outcome of the interaction between pupils’ individual differences and their educational settings, placing importance on identification and removal of barriers within the learning environment. This model is linked to access to mainstream schools, as well as more inclusive school development planning, increasing the capacity of institutions to meet the growing diversity of need amongst learners through transformation of culture, policy, and practice (Skidmore, 1996) achieved, for example, through physical adaptations to school buildings, differentiated curriculum and professional development of staff (Skidmore, 2002; Norwich, 2014). The principal criticism, voiced largely by disabled people and their advocates (Hodkinson, 2019), suggested that the social model provided limited acknowledgement of the experience of impairment and the impact on the lives of individuals (Johnstone, 2012). Similarly, the model was perceived to overlook heterogeneity within the experiences of disability and its intersection with other facets of identity such as age, race, gender, and sexuality (Hodkinson, 2019).

Diverse conceptualisations of disability have informed and enhanced the legislative and education policy agenda to establish SEN as a legal concept used to identify heterogeneous groups of pupils eligible for additional provision and educational support services within a rights-based framework of education (Norwich, 2019). SEN, however, is a complex term with shifting conceptual, legislative, and administrative definitions, which has contributed to its emergence as a contested term within the educational discourse, policy and practice. Notably, the interchangeable use of terminology such as ‘SEN’, ‘SEN/D’, ‘special education’, alongside ambiguous use of diagnostic terms such as ‘learning difficulty’, ‘learning disability’ and ‘intellectual disability’ has generated definitional variation nationally and internationally, making comparative research difficult to record with precision.

In addition, there is also a lack of consensus in approaches, guidance, and policy requirements within special and inclusive education (Wood, 2021). While some commonalities exist in the international language of SEN (Rix et al., 2013), a range of persistent and unresolved problems relating to the education of pupils with SEN is acknowledged (Webster, 2019), not least the associated negative impact on pupils. For example, Shakespeare (2018) suggested that the labelling of pupils confers a stigmatised identity which is often othered, limiting or negative. The impact of such labelling can be seen relative to both the general label of SEN as well as to individual types of SEN. Stigmatisation can affect pupils on more than one level, placing perceived limits on pupil achievement and leading to limited experiences of social inclusion at school (Rowland, 2017).

2.1.2 SEN in Northern Ireland

Education for pupils with SEN is provided regionally through a system of parallel provision. At post-primary level, pupils with SEN can attend special schools, non-selective secondary schools and, increasingly, selective voluntary grammar schools (O'Connor et al., 2021). Regional legislation defines 'Special Educational Needs' as special educational provision relating to experience of a disability which "*prevents or hinders ... use of everyday educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of the same age in ordinary school*" or of a learning difficulty significantly greater than the majority of pupils of the same age (The Education (NI) Order 1996, Section 3(2)).

Historically, the legislative framework (*The Education (NI) Order 1996, The Special Educational Needs and Disability (NI) Order 2005*) strengthened the right of pupils with SEN to attend mainstream schools, aligned with parental preference, and contingent upon the compatible provision of efficient education for all pupils. The Code of Practice (DE, 1998) outlined a five-phased framework through which to recognise and meet the needs of pupils through school-based (stage one and two), external (stage three) and specialist (stage four and five) provision, including withdrawal support, as well as additional classroom support provided by a CA.

The Department of Education (DE) published a proposed policy for inclusion *Every School a Good School, The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion* (DE, 2009) welcoming parent and stakeholder consultations in 2010. In alignment with policy reform across the devolved education systems of the UK, the policy proposed to widen the model for additional provision beyond the SEN framework. Frederickson and Cline (2015) noted that all four governments in the UK

have adopted the superordinate concept of ‘Additional Educational Needs’ (AEN) albeit with substantial differences. In Wales, review of the SEN framework in 2012 led to the development of the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Act (2018) and a corresponding Additional Learning Needs Code (2021) (Welsh Government, 2021). ALN is broadly similar as provision for SEN with the exception that the age range extends from 0 to 25 years. Additionally, there is an emphasis on greater collaboration between local education authorities and health boards. In Scotland, an alternative conceptualisation of ‘Additional Support Needs’ (ASN) relates to a wide range of barriers to learning within a wide framework of interaction. ASN can arise for a range of reasons within the learning environment, wider family circumstances, disability, or health needs, or relate to social and emotional factors impacting pupils. Each barrier requires additional support to ensure that pupils reach their full potential (The Scottish Government, 2017).

In NI, a framework of Additional Educational Needs (AEN) sought to broaden the remit of inclusive classroom practice with a focus on four key themes: SEN, English as an Additional Language (EAL), Family Circumstances, and Social and Emotional difficulties (DE, 2009; Goodall, 2020). During consultation, this wider inclusive framework was criticised on funding and operational grounds, with the consequence that it was not included within the SENDA (2016) proposals (Frederickson and Cline, 2015).

Regionally, educational policy for SEN has been under a protracted and incomplete review since 2006 (NICCY, 2020), costing an estimated £3.6million (NIAO, 2020; NI Assembly, 2021). This review was prompted by concerns about the level of bureaucracy within the SEN framework (O’Connor, 2005; NIAO, 2017), the increase in the number of children with SEN and evidence of inconsistencies and

delays in assessment and provision of SEN support (DE, 2009; NIAO, 2017). To date, the review remains incomplete, with many of the proposals withdrawn due to financial constraints, political instability, and public pressure for significant revision (Purdy, Hunter, and Totton, 2020; NICCY 2020).

Legislative reform through the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA, 2016) provided a further revision to the SEN framework, extending the educational rights of pupils and their parents through a child-centred approach, enhancing provision and co-operation with health and social care authorities through a suite of amendments including subordinate legislation, a proposed revised Code of Practice (2022) and a programme of training for school staff. Key changes introduced by the SENDA 2016 included refinement of the SENCO role to that of Learning Support Co-ordinator (LSC) in all schools, the adaptation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) into Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) as well as a prioritisation of pupil voice in decisions relating to their support and education (SENDA, 2016). The recent revision of the Code of Practice (2022) has updated statutory guidance addressing the identification, assessment and educational provision for pupils who may have SEN through the five following principles:

- High expectations and improved outcomes for all pupils achieved through a graduated response reflecting a continuum of needs and provision,
- Inclusion as the model for meeting the needs of most pupils with SEN and disability within mainstream schools alongside their peers, without the need for statutory assessment or a statement of SEN,

- Fullest possible, broad, and balanced access to the NI Curriculum and Entitlement Framework,
- Early identification and intervention from the EA and HSC Trust partners,
- Effective partnership and co-operation through the development of meaningful relationships between pupils, parents, schools and the EA (DE, 2022, paragraph 1.20).

The revised statutory procedure for the identification and assessment of SEN reduced the former five staged approach (DE, 1998) to a more streamlined three staged one (DE, 2022). As a graduated response, new provision to support pupils with SEN will be met initially at school. At Stage One, the class teacher, supported by the LSC, determines whole school support for a pupil who may have SEN within the school provision map. The pupil is placed on the SEN register with a PLP prepared to co-ordinate and monitor this provision.

At Stage Two, pupils who continue to experience barriers to learning can avail of additional support including EA-based advisory and support services, resources, and training for school staff. If necessary, the EA will undertake a statutory assessment of the pupils' SEN. At Stage Three, pupils are provided with a statement of SEN which, as a statutory document, outlines their educational needs and required provision. It is at this point within the framework that a CA may be identified as an appropriate support. CA support is typically allocated on an individualised basis, quantified on hourly and/or weekly terms. While the Code of Practice (DE, 1998) and the draft revised Code (DE, 2022) do not explicitly refer to the work of CAs as a form of SEN support, their involvement with individual pupils

with statements of SEN has been a cornerstone of inclusive practice in NI (Moran and Abbott, 2002; DE, 2011; O'Connor and Hansson, 2012).

Despite incoming reform, current policy, practice, and provision for SEN in NI schools has continued to be challenged by 'a myriad of issues preventing children from enjoying their rights to an effective education' (NICCY, 2020, 3). Such issues have become increasingly visible over the duration of this research, including the impact of political instability on educational (and SEN) provision, budgetary pressures on and the fallout from whistle blower claims that the Education Authority had mishandled the administration of statutory assessment request forms. Regional political instability has undoubtedly delayed the necessary reform of the Special Educational Needs framework (Purdy, Hunter and Totton, 2020; NICCY, 2020), with concerns raised about the operation of and the escalating costs of SEN services at a time of financial austerity within the NI education system (NIAO, 2017; 2020; NICCY, 2020). The suspension of the NI Executive over the period January 2017 to January 2020 led to a further delay in the implementation of the SENDA legislation as well as accentuated budgetary pressures within SEN provision (NIAO, 2020; O'Connor et al., 2021). Recent analysis of the cost of additional support suggested increased expenditure on SEN of £312 million in 2019-20 as unsustainable (NIAO, 2020), while at the same time under-resourced and under inordinate strain with current levels of capacity and resourcing in schools insufficient to meet the increasing diversity of pupil need (NICCY, 2020).

Most recently, further questions have been raised about the culture, ethos and operation of inclusion at the highest level of local authority governance and implementation. An internal review of Special Education within the EA found evidence of 'deep rooted and systemic weaknesses' in the operation of SEN

processes (NI Assembly, 2021). Specific concerns relate to the inaccessibility of educational psychology and early intervention services for pupils with SEN (NICCY, 2020) and continuous unacceptable delays within statutory assessment procedure (NIAO, 2020). As an example, in 2019-20 85% of statutory assessments were issued outside of the statutory timeframe of 26 weeks. NIAO (2020, 10) found evidence of the longest delay lasted 463 weeks (8 years and 11 months), and an average completion time of 45 weeks.

At classroom level, attention is drawn to a further perceived lack of capacity and skill within the teaching and non-teaching staff to support the increasing numbers of children with SEN, particularly pupils with social, emotional, behavioural and well-being needs (SBEW) (ETI, 2018; NICCY, 2020; NIAO, 2020). Specific concerns relate to the knowledge, skills and experience of both teachers and classroom assistants, with the acknowledgement that there is limited SEN focus in professional learning at pre-service and in-service levels for teachers at ITE and EPD, and at all levels of CA training.

“Nobody in the EA trains the classroom assistant. Nobody sits down with the classroom assistant and tells them what they should be doing. Once a child gets a classroom assistant, we don’t go back in and chat to the classroom assistant and give the classroom assistant pointers and tips on how to work. None of that goes on.” (NICCY, 2020, 81).

On an individual level, access to support for pupils is understood as a ‘constant fight or battle for parents’ to have their parental role and children’s education right respected (NICCY, 2020, 77), with reports of mixed parental perceptions of the expertise, understanding and readiness for support from school

staff. Indeed, parental perceptions of school personnel suggested that CAs provided a key support for parents (85%). However, this was accompanied with concerns on an undue focus on the role of CAs within SEN provision and misuse of CA hours (ibid, 75 - 76).

Additionally, regional research has identified an increased prevalence of SEN in NI with recent analysis reporting higher prevalence of SEN in the pupil population over the last decade with increases across the primary (16%), secondary (19%) and grammar (65%) sectors (O'Connor et al., 2021). A review by the NIAO (2020) reported that the number of children with a statement of SEN is currently 5.5%, a sizeably higher proportion than the 2% benchmark set out in the Code of Practice (DE, 1998). More specifically, the changing profile of individual types of SEN has shown NI having the highest prevalence rates for autism in the UK (McConkey, 2020), with a reported 213% increase from 1.5% of the school population in 2010/2011 to 4.7% in 2021/22 (DOH, 2022, 8). Although recent changes in the categorisation and recording of SEN repositioned autism from the SEN register to a medical register (O'Conner et al., 2021), recent figures show that 87% of pupils with autism also have SEN; of these, over half (58%) have a statutory statement (DOH, 2022, 11).

At present there is an ongoing independent review of SEN commissioned by DE (DE, 2022a) which aims to understand whether SEN provision and processes are fit for purpose in terms of pupil progress, impact and outcomes. It further aims to offer an assessment on whether SEN provision can be delivered on a more effective and efficient basis. A key aspect of this evaluation is a review of the impact of CA support on pupil outcomes (ibid). It is within this context that the current research

seeks to explore the perceptions and experiences of this key workforce, in order to understand their contribution to education for pupils with SEN.

2.1.3 The Historical Development of the CA Role

This section presents an overview of the CA role and its evolution in educational policy and practice, with comparative reference to empirical research elsewhere. It looks at the evolving functions of the assistant workforce within education and points to the increasingly complex and significant role they currently occupy within mainstream settings.

“Other assistants are being appointed to relieve class teachers of some of the burdens involved in looking after very young children. This process has gone a long way but not, in our judgement, far enough. The ancillary services that exist are not yet provided everywhere and they are not comprehensive enough” (CACE, 1967, 319).

The presence of assistants in classrooms in the UK can be traced as far back as the pupil-teachers of the nineteenth century and parent volunteers of the twentieth century (Watkinson, 2003). Formalised roles for non-teaching staff in the UK began with the establishment of the National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB) in 1945, providing an accredited ancillary role for those working with the youngest children in private nurseries and the earliest years of schooling. The work of non-teaching staff was pushed into the spotlight by the Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) on primary school education in England and Wales. The report described development of the assistant role within nursery and primary phases of education, pointing to the varied growth of this workforce across a number of roles including ancillary helpers, auxiliaries, welfare assistants and teachers’ aides. The report recommended that the

work of welfare assistants, principally providing care for pupils, could be usefully developed and located within classrooms to provide a quasi-educational function as a teacher's aide.

“Teachers' aides can make a contribution to junior as well as infant schools and their employment in both will reduce the risk of their being thought 'good enough' only for the younger children. In practice, general purpose aides would be most useful with children up to eight or nine (or rather older in areas with special problems), and aides with special skills, who can also give some general help, would be valuable with older primary children” (CACE, 1967, 331).

Arguably, this early report established many of the longstanding stereotypes associated with the assistants' role, including the need for a minimum level of training or vocational qualification, a low level of pay, as well as the targeted recruitment of female school leavers and mothers. Somewhat presciently, the report cautioned on the potential and inherent ambiguity that might accompany the development of a non-teaching workforce:

“It seems then that some authorities are hesitating to employ helpers of this kind because of their cost, because they are uncertain how to use them or because they share the anxiety of some teachers about 'dilution' or fear the consequences of forcing their employment on a reluctant profession (CACE, 1967, 319).

The Warnock Report (DES, 1978) had a subsequent role in the development of assistants in school settings and arguably established a remit for the employment

of auxiliaries to support pupils with SEN as part of the integration agenda at that time (Ainscow, 1993).

“Special classes for children of primary school age, whether in special schools or units or attached to ordinary schools, and special classes for children of secondary school age with physical disabilities, severe learning difficulties or emotional or behavioural disorders should each have at least one ancillary worker” (DES, 1978, 361).

A key recommendation of the Warnock Report was the use of non-teaching assistants to support pupils with SEN in mainstream classrooms through provision of care and through support to the teacher. In doing so, the Report endorsed the role of the assistant within the new policy framework of educational inclusion. In Northern Ireland, education for children with SEN became the responsibility of the Department of Education through the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order (1986) (O'Connor and Hansson, 2012). While the Warnock Report did not include Northern Ireland in its purview, it had a considerable influence on the regional educational landscape through the formulation and implementation of parallel legislation and policy for SEN in the form of the Education Act (NI) 1996 (Purdy, Hunter and Totton, 2020). This legislation standardised educational practice for SEN through the establishment of statutory guidance that aligned with policy in England (O'Connor and Hansson, 2012). Warnock placed considerable emphasis on the role envisaged as ‘*ancillary supports*’ within the mainstream environment (DES, 1978, 319).

“...the help of an ancillary worker is often crucial to the effective placement of an individual child with a disability or disorder in an ordinary class. An

ancillary worker should be provided for each child who needs such support... and often to combine this work with other necessary tasks within the school. Ancillary workers are usually chosen for their sympathetic attitude to children and their experience as parents. Indeed, the care, extra understanding and affection they offer can be very important to some children. They have little training, except where school-based in-service training is well developed, and they rely on the teachers with whom they work for guidance as to their duties” (DES, 1978, 274).

Regionally, the influence of both the Plowden Report (CACE, 1967) and the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) can be seen in the implementation of relevant local policy initiatives. Making a Good Start (MaGS) P1 (ETI, 1998; Moran and Abbott, 2002) allocated £7 million of funding to Primary 1 classes for additional physical and personnel resources as an investment in early years intervention (ETI, 1998; 2002; Gray, 2007). Additionally, McGarvey et al., (1996), who undertook a study of the implementation of curricular programmes within the new NI curriculum, evidenced the use of Local Management of Schools (LMS) funding to employ CAs in the primary sector. The initiative provided teachers with ‘another pair of hands and eyes’ particularly in Key Stage One, for example, mounting of wall displays, managing equipment and reprographics; headteachers noted this saved teachers ‘considerable time and thereby increasing contact with pupils’ in practical classroom activities (McGarvey et al., 1996, 299) . The evolution from welfare assistants, as identified in Plowden report (CACE, 1967) and Warnock report (DES, 1978), into direct classroom assistance to the teacher was viewed positively in this study, with the suggestion that ‘especially where there were large classes, the route to effective

teaching within the more practically orientated educational reform lay in auxiliary support' (ibid, 300).

Mirroring international trends, the expansion of assistants' roles in the 1990s is described as an ad hoc and haphazard development or 'unplanned drift' (Swann and Loxley, 1998, 12), from one of care and housekeeping, to substantial involvement as 'an assistant teacher' requiring a shift in teachers' role to that of 'classroom manager' (Thomas, 1998, 12). Mason (2008) reported the perception in the early implementation of inclusion that children with disabilities were only accepted into the mainstream classroom if they were accompanied by an assistant as a '*full-time minder*' (64) who was responsible for physical care and safety of the children, and adaptation of their schoolwork.

Moving forward, the establishment of Teaching Assistants (TA) in England and Wales can be identified within number of diffuse, complicated and muddled strands of educational policy (Watkinson, 2003; Lehane, 2018). It has been argued that these policy directions reinforced the ambiguity of the increasingly 'nebulous' concept of pupil support (Webster and Blatchford, 2019) in England and Wales, which established the TA role as crucially non-teaching in nature, but central to teaching.

In addition to SEN provision, wider roles for TAs in English schools were developed through the Raising Standards and Tackling Workload: A National Agreement (DfES, 2003) and the National Numeracy and Literacy Strategies (Hancock and Eyres, 2004) which aimed to modernise the education workforce, providing much needed support for pupils and their overburdened teachers (Kerry, 2005; Dillow, 2010). These initiatives were grounded in common-sense suggestions

that general support for teachers and higher adult-pupil ratios could improve classroom practice (Moran and Abbott, 2002; Groom and Rose, 2005; Lehane 2018; Pinkard, 2021). Nationally distinctive initiatives such as Preparation, Planning and Assessment (PPA) time for teachers (2006) and the introduction of the Higher-Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) status (Groom, 2006) were established through the redistribution of routine, generic professional duties to TAs, freeing up teachers to prioritise their pedagogical work (Cajkler et al., 2007).

In contrast, the role of CAs was a less visible feature of SEN policy in NI. Despite the centrality of assistants in the inclusion agenda, there is only implicit reference to their deployment in the support of pupils with SEN. With the implementation of the Code of Practice (DE, 1998), assistants were employed specifically to support individual pupils in mainstream and special school settings. In their noteworthy early study, Moran and Abbott (2002) examined the pivotal role of this workforce for the inclusion of pupils with learning difficulties in a small-scale qualitative study of primary, post-primary and special schools in NI. Interviews with school leaders revealed an early perception of assistants' contribution to enacting the inclusion agenda. As a foundational study, it reported findings on a plethora of themes including: the role and responsibilities of assistants, the qualifications and attributes, training and professional development as well as problems encountered in practice (ibid, 164). Crucially, the authors noted the 'increasingly diverse and demanding' remit of CAs, who provided learning and pastoral support for pupils 'as a translator, scribe and supporter', as well as acting as 'the teacher's eyes and ears' (ibid, 166). The emergence of CAs in NI, arguably, can be viewed as a realisation of Plowden's and Warnock's (CACE, 1967; DES, 1978) proposed Teaching Aide role, configuring diverse ancillary duties into a single assistant role. Interestingly, Moran

and Abbott (2002, 166) shed some initial light on CA support for post-primary pupils, with school leaders perceiving the CA could support the transition of school leavers and ‘help shape the attitudes of Further Education (FE) staff’.

Increasing policy focus on inclusive practice from 2000 onwards prioritised support in the classroom over pupil withdrawal which effectively removed them from peer groups for remedial support; this placed greater emphasis on in-class support and reinforced the importance of collaborative working between teachers and CAs.

“Where a child’s statement specifies, they should receive support from a CA, the assistant must be allowed into the classroom. Reasonable steps can be taken to ensure the teacher and CA work effectively together and support each other” (DE, 2005, 55).

Further development of the CA role was advanced by industrial action over the period 1995 - 2007 over job descriptions, pay and conditions. The resultant job evaluation resulted in re-definition of the role to differentiated levels of pupil support. At this time, individual ELBs issued draft policy guidance to schools on the ‘Effective Use of Assistants in Schools’ (BELB, 2007). This guidance aligned with the establishment of ‘General Assistant’ and ‘Classroom Assistant’ posts, with the distinction that the former was employed to meet the physical needs of a pupil, and the latter to provide educational support and care (NEELB, 2011). Further detail on the management of CAs within SEN guidance documents, including *Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for SEN and Inclusion* (DE, 2009) and the *Resource File for SEN* (DE, 2011), identified the responsibilities for schools in the management and development of CAs as well as signalled the duty of teachers to

‘deploy, organise and guide’ the work of assistants through a collaborative partnership approach (GTCNI, 2007, 32).

“The assistant should be seen as part of the SEN and inclusion team in a school. Teachers and classroom assistants work together to plan, deliver and evaluate provision including the child’s individualised Education Plan (IEP)” (DE, 2011, 20).

Considerable emphasis was placed on building capacity for educational inclusion. Policy proposals and guidance (DE, 2009; DE, 2011) established a focus on the development of the CA role as a key element of the wider workforce. Within a holistic framework, it was further recommended that CAs be included in joint training and professional development opportunities for SEN and a wider remit for assistants was proposed as good practice. Key features of the role included:

- The development of ‘specialised expertise to meet the individual needs of the children’,
- Support for development pupil independence,
- Significant contribution to ‘the overall social, emotional, learning and pastoral development of the children within the school’,
- Contribution ‘to the planning, preparation and, where appropriate, facilitation of learning’ (DE, 2011, 21).

For over a decade, following the publication of these policy proposals CA support in NI has remained largely unchanged and, unlike other jurisdictions, has not been reviewed, creating an urgent policy and practice gap regionally (O’Connor et al., 2021b).

2.1.4 The International Profile of CAs

This section provides an overview of the international body of research relating to the profile of CAs within the global movement of inclusive education. Research on the role of the assistant workforce is ‘evolving’ (Sharma and Salend, 2016, 116; Webster and de Boer, 2021), with a proliferation of national and international empirical evidence across educational settings over the last three decades reflecting ‘a growing area of interest and importance’ (Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle, 2010, 44). Studies have emerged from the UK (Watkinson, 2003; Mansaray, 2006; MacKenzie, 2011; Blatchford et al., 2012; Lehane, 2016; Webster and Blatchford, 2019), the Republic of Ireland (Logan, 2006; Keating and O’Connor, 2012; Kerins et al., 2018; Griffith and Blatchford, 2021; Zhao et al., 2021), Europe (Takala, 2007; Angelides et al., 2009; Egilson and Traustadottir, 2009; Breyer et al., 2021; Fritzsche and Kopfer, 2021; Jardi et al., 2022), the USA (Patterson, 2006; Giangreco, Suter and Doyle, 2010; Causton-Theoharis, 2014; Askbaker, 2015; Giangreco, 2021; Reddy, Lekwa and Glover, 2021) and Canada (Bennett et al., 2021), Australia (Howard and Ford, 2007; Chambers, 2015; Aprile and Harris, 2015).

The work of classroom assistants is one element in the development of education support teams to facilitate inclusive learning opportunities for all children and young people. As already identified, the resourcing of support staff is dependent on financial considerations. Internationally, their presence is seen as evidence to progressing United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).⁴ An underpinning principle of the SDG is to reduce inequalities, particularly for marginalised groups; SDG 4, Quality Education, acknowledges the importance of access to learning and the value of inclusive provision. Aligned with this, the

⁴ <https://www.unesco.org/en/education/education2030-sdg4>.

UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) identified the employment of Education Support Personnel (ESP) as an integral mainstream requirement for pupils with special educational needs. Within some jurisdictions, this support role has evolved alongside increasingly diverse, multi-disciplinary teams deployed in schools. For example, specialist roles include Special Education Teachers (SET) in the Republic of Ireland (Kerins et al., 2018) and Inclusion Coaches in Canada (Bennett et al., 2021), as well as educational psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, behavioural therapists, autism practitioners, counsellors, learning mentors and youth workers, all employed in varying capacities to accommodate the needs of an increasing diversity of learners (Giangreco, Doyle and Suter, 2014; UNESCO, 2020).

While there is wide variation in the use of support staff teams globally, assistant roles are an established presence in classrooms internationally (Giangreco, Doyle and Suter, 2014; Masdeu Navarro, 2015; Sharma and Salend, 2016; Rose 2020). The body of research highlights a plethora of permutations of these non-teaching posts. In the USA, paraprofessionals or paraeducators provide support to pupils with disabilities in special and regular classroom settings, reflecting successive legislation of No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2001; the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004; and Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015). Non-statutory guidance has defined the remit of paraprofessionals as the provision of instructional support, including one-to-one tutoring, assistance with classroom management, parental involvement, and translation activities (NCLB, 2004). There is estimated to be approximately one million paraprofessionals employed in US schools (Reddy, Lekwa and Glover, 2020); they are required to have completed two years of post-compulsory education, in addition to competence

in instruction, reading, writing and mathematics (NCLB, 2004; Chambers, 2015). In Australia, a similar role is undertaken by Teacher Aides who, under the supervision of a teacher, provide direct and indirect support to pupils within an expanding remit.

“Increasingly, teacher aides are taking on more complex and challenging tasks, some of which they are untrained, or not supported to perform (e.g., conducting functional assessments, implementing behavioural interventions, providing personal care, collecting performance data, tutoring, adapting curricular materials and activities, facilitating social inclusion, and providing direct instruction to the students they support) (Howard and Ford, 2007, 26).

Similarly, in the Republic of Ireland, the role of the SNA, originally established through the Child-Care Assistant Scheme (1979), provided non-teaching support for teachers within the special school sector (Rose, 2020). The SNA remit has remained non-teaching (NCSE, 2018). However, due to expansion in the employment of SNAs, associated increases in expenditure and evidence of a perceived drift into the provision of educational support tasks in all school types (Logan, 2006; Keating and O’Connor 2012; Kerins et al., 2018), a review of the SNA Scheme (NSCE, 2018) recommended a renaming of the role to ‘inclusion support assistants’ (ISAs) with a clarified focus on supporting pupils with additional care needs (Zhao et al., 2021).

Across the devolved education systems of the UK, there is a plethora of nationally distinctive roles for assistants. Significant policy and research attention in England and Wales, has led to the prominence of the ‘Teaching Assistant’ developed within the workforce remodelling agenda, with the official term of ‘teaching

assistant' adopted in 2003 (Cajkler et al., 2007; Blatchford et al., 2012). The role of the TA is multifaceted, with a focus on providing support for pupils, teachers, the school, and the curriculum. In 2014, the Department for Education (DfE) in England, developed a set of non-statutory occupational standards for assistants, identifying the primary remit of TAs as that of 'assisting teachers to raise the learning and attainment of pupils, while also promoting their independence, self-esteem and social inclusion' (NEU, 2014, 4).

Although there is voluminous research activity concentrated on the work of assistant roles in the UK and Europe, the USA and Canada, as well as Australia and New Zealand the replication of this model of pupil support is becoming visible on a global scale. International studies have demonstrated the increasing presence of adult assistants in classrooms outside of the global north including Botswana (Habulezi et al., 2016), Hong Kong (Trent, 2014), India (Giangreco, Doyle and Suter, 2014; Rose, 2020), Israel (Moshe, 2019), Jordan (Lee, 2021), Pakistan (Hammad, 2019), Singapore and South Africa (Giangreco, Suter and Doyle, 2014), Thailand (Vorapanya and Dunlapp, 2014), UAE (Gaad, 2015) and, Zimbabwe (Deluca and Kett, 2015).

In contrast to the wide variation of assistant roles, a small number of studies explored commonalities within the global trends of assistant deployment (Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter, 2014; Masdeu Navarro, 2015; Sharma and Salend, 2016; Rose, 2020). Sharma and Salend (2016) reporting a systematic synthesis of international empirical literature found commonalities in the roles of TAs across eleven jurisdictions. The review concluded that across the globe the deployment of TAs did not reflect best practice and signposted two key issues. Firstly, they suggested that TAs typically undertook a range of poorly defined professional roles.

“... in addition to supporting teacher-directed instruction and performing a variety of non-instructional roles, TAs are assuming significant instructional, classroom management, and socialisation roles, making important curricular decisions regarding the education of students with disabilities and teaching them in separate locations” (Sharma and Salend, 2016, 125).

A comparative study by Giangreco, Doyle and Suter (2014) drew attention to the recurrence of role ambiguity in the function of assistants' work with teachers *'though not exclusively or necessarily with teaching'* (628). Associated with this concern has been the mixed evidence impact of assistant support, with a reported array of potential benefits and inadvertent drawbacks due to proximity to pupils (ibid).

The second issue suggested by Sharma and Salend (2016) was the observation that these roles were undertaken within a professional environment characterised by inadequate training and professional learning, insufficient supervision, and limited communication between teachers and assistants. Consequently, they suggested that such deployment fostered common misalignment between roles defined in policy and those assumed in practice (ibid), with implications for the educational experience of pupils.

The body of empirical studies confirms a number of persistent problems, unresolved issues and gaps (Giangreco, 2013; 2021) in understanding noted internationally, including role confusion, ambiguity, and a lack of clarity; inadequate training and insufficient supervision; and employment challenges. A transnational qualitative study by Breyer et al., (2021) within the 'Improving Assistance in Inclusive Educational Settings' (IMAS) project on the characteristics of assistant

roles across five European countries, reported variations in the working practices of assistants across four education systems (Austria; Bulgaria; Portugal and the UK), noting that only Slovakia had formal qualification requirements for the assistant role. Overall findings demonstrated a lack of defining training requirements for appointment to Learning Support Assistant (LSA) roles, and variable professional development opportunities across jurisdictions and recommended that training on SEN knowledge and associated competencies should become a formal requirement.

In recent years, the CA contribution to educational inclusion has acquired significance. A recent special journal issue on the work of CAs (Webster and de Boer, 2021b) highlighted key concerns within the field of educational research, chiefly the growing international and national data shortage at a macro-level, characterised by significant gaps in knowledge and understanding within the work of assistants. In particular, Webster and de Boer (2021b) pointed to the need for improved utilisation of national administrative data to articulate the characteristics, roles and practices of assistants, as well as greater involvement of assistants as research subjects and participants (Webster and De Boer, 2021). Such is the level of interest in this research arena there is a need for further research on the CA workforce in NI.

“... 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 of teachers” (ibid, 299).

Within the post-pandemic empirical landscape, Webster, and de Boer (2021) and Giangreco (2021) have sought to reorient the research agenda within a

globalised focus on the assistant workforce. In this context, a study on the work of CAs regionally would contribute to the gap in knowledge and extend previous research (McGarvey et al., 1996; Moran and Abbott, 2002; 2007; Gray et al., 2007; Abbott et al., 2011; O'Connor et al., 2012, 2018, 2021b). While the international research field has been critiqued for a reliance on descriptive small scale qualitative designs focused on assistants as the primary voices in research (Giangreco, Doyle and Suter, 2014; Sharma and Salend, 2016; Giangreco, 2021; Webster and De Boer, 2021), regionally CAs, particularly in the post-primary sector, have not been afforded the opportunity to contribute their perspective on their work within inclusive classrooms.

2.2 The Evolving Role of Classroom Assistants

“Inclusion has become ostensibly contingent on the creation and utilisation of a relatively new type of educator: the TA” (Webster and de Boer, 2021, 164).

This section summarises the myriad roles adopted by CAs. Empirical research reports the view that when deployed and managed effectively CAs can make a significant contribution to educational inclusion for pupils with SEN (O'Brien and Garner, 2001; Rutherford, 2011; Cajkler and Tennant; 2009; Abbott et al., 2011; Blatchford et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2021). In a systematic review of international research over the period 2005 – 2015, Sharma and Salend (2016) presented evidence that international trends of TA deployment had led to the development of support roles with significant pedagogical, assessment, socialisation, and behavioural responsibilities. Similarly, the results from earlier systematic reviews (Cajkler et al., 2007; Cajkler et al., 2007a) suggested the emergence of an assistant role which made

a number of key contributions to educational inclusion, pupil learning, and to teacher support (Cajkler and Tennant, 2009). These are explored in the following section.

2.2.1 Educational Support

International research and policy have highlighted the evolution of CAs as a member of the classroom team introduced to support the inclusion agenda (Cremin et al., 2005; Slater and Gazeley 2019; Jackson et al., 2021). CA employment and deployment have become inextricably linked to the inclusion of pupils with SEN (Webster et al., 2018; Webster 2022), enabling pupil participation and access to learning within the mainstream setting. A recurrent suggestion within empirical literature is that without the support of CAs, pupils, teachers and education systems would struggle to make effective provision for the increasing diversity of pupils (Webster et al., 2018; Pinkard, 2021). Studies have evidenced the move of assistants into the classroom with a specific remit to support the teaching and learning of pupils with SEN under the direction of the class teacher. In this context, individualised attention and continuous contact were seen as integral to developing an understanding of pupils' needs and preferences in order to enhance their educational experience. This was conceptualised by Howes et al., (2003):

“When paid adult support staff gave detailed personal knowledge of the pupils they support (knowledge of language, culture, interests, family, history, behaviour or any combination of these) and can make use of this knowledge to engage these pupils in learning and participating, they have a clear and positive impact” (Howes, 2003, 150).

The traditional educational support role for assistants, modelled on non-instructional and indirect engagement with pupils, was based on the premise that

CAs would increase adult-pupil classroom ratios and provide additional opportunities for teachers to interact with pupils requiring greater pedagogic input. Indirect support is characterised by CA mediation of pupil participation and learning activities (Howes, 2003; Dillow, 2010; Blatchford et al., 2012), as well as adaptation of the classroom environment through a range of individualised adjustments aimed at enhancing the accessibility of the curriculum for pupils with SEN. International studies have identified the potential benefits of CA support for teachers (Blatchford et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2021). For example, the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project (Blatchford et al., 2012) reported a positive impact on teachers, where TA presence eased teacher workload and increased job satisfaction. As the role and remit of CAs expanded and became more complex, their growing involvement in ‘teacherly’ classroom activities is charted (Dillow, 2010) demonstrating a growing instructional role and delegation of some responsibility for and direct proximity with pupils, specifically those with statements of SEN (Fraser and Meadows, 2008).

Indeed, Blatchford et al., (2012, 13) characterised the development of the TA role towards ‘a direct pedagogical role, supporting and interacting with pupils, usually in one-to-one and group contexts, and predominantly with pupils with SEN’. Such interactions between pupils and TAs were considered typically more individualised, sustained and interactive than teacher-pupil engagements which were viewed largely passive and primarily directed at whole-class groups (Blatchford et al., 2012). Undertaking a closer analysis of audio-recordings of teacher and TA interactions with pupils in primary and secondary schools in England and Wales, Rubie-Davis et al., (2010) reported key differences in practitioner interactions with pupils. Firstly, while teacher interactions largely focused on learning and

understanding, TA interactions were viewed as more focused-on task completion. Secondly, the authors suggested that teacher-pupil engagement was more proactive and controlled, with TAs primary adopting a reactive approach due to limited levels of pedagogic and curricular knowledge within individual lessons. The authors conclude that there is need for further research on the contribution of TAs to classroom practice, which they suggest could have the potential to complement teacher practice.

Undertaking a mixed methods study of the educational experiences of 49 pupils with SEN attending 34 secondary schools in England, Webster and Blatchford (2019) identified TA input to teaching and learning activities as:

“clarifying and repeating teacher information, keeping pupils on task and focused on their work, promoting independence, prompting, reminding, encouraging and praising, helping pupils start work, reinforce concepts, question students and deepen their understanding” (Webster and Blatchford 2019, 105).

The researchers found that the presence and support of TAs was a predominant form of practical differentiation as TAs ‘bridged the learning in the moment through repetition and modifications in their language’ (ibid, 107). A number of studies which utilised time logs and systematic observations to examine the work of assistants attest to sustained and continuous interactions which characterised TA support. Research focusing on the post-primary sector found that teachers aides’ working across a sample of 31 schools in Adelaide Australia, spent up to 50% of the school day providing direct instruction to pupils (Howard and Ford, 2007).

A further area of CA support is the differentiation of learning activities and resources. The allocation of CA support to pupils with SEN is understood as a form of differentiated support for pupil learning, providing an enhanced and individualised level of pupil attention and supplemental instruction. Webster and Blatchford (2019, 19) describe this work as ambiguously operating in the gaps left by teachers ‘trusted and empowered to differentiate in the moment’. The authors, however, question the appropriateness of this practice, suggesting that differentiation is a duty more appropriately undertaken by subject teachers with implications for the pedagogical diet of pupils at post-primary level (*ibid*). In a similar vein, other studies have reported mixed CA perceptions of responsibility for differentiation for pupils. Symes and Humphrey (2011, 61) reported the need for TAs to present information in ‘an autistic-friendly way’, adding that, while perceiving this to be the role of the teacher, they would independently provide this support if the teacher did not. Additionally, Lehané (2016, 12), also investigating TA practice in the secondary environment, noted a similar finding with differentiation suggested as a reluctant duty for TAs, accompanied by the perception that when TA standards of inclusive practice were not met, they would ‘fill in the gaps’.

In contrast, and in spite of the emergent instructional roles for assistants, recurrent empirical findings (Balshaw and Farrell, 2002; Howes 2003; Giangreco et al 2005; Eglison and Traustadottir, 2009; Symes and Humphrey, 2011; Sharma and Salend, 2016; Vivash and Morgan, 2019; Giangreco et al., 2021) have recorded some disquiet about the continued use of one-to-one allocation and deployment practices which are perceived to contribute to a culture of learner helplessness that prioritises supported participation over skill development. Crucially, an associated negative impact on pupils’ academic outcomes has been reported with implications on pupils’

educational experiences (Blatchford et al., 2012; Sharples et al., 2015; Giangreco, 2021).

Research evidence has suggested that inappropriate deployment at a systemic level is characterised by the delegation of responsibility for pupil teaching and learning from teachers to assistants (Webster, 2022). In this instance, classroom practice personifies CA and pupil as an island within the mainstream, separated from the teacher, their peers and the curriculum, and experienced as a form of mainstream exclusion (Giangreco, 2010; Webster 2022).

“TAs are placed in situations each day in which they have to make pedagogical decisions beyond their expertise, and the effects of this are more damaging for pupils who struggle most” (Webster et al., 2010, 331).

Moran and Abbott (2002) cited examples of CAs doing work on pupils’ behalf and in doing so, removing the challenge in learning through over-protective support. This effect is also evidenced in qualitative studies which draw on pupils’ experiences of receiving support in the classroom. For example, in a small-scale Belgian study, Mortier et al., (2011, 213) found that pupils aged 9 – 18 contrasted the positive benefits of the removal of barriers to participation with negative impacts on their well-being. Providing an interesting insight into the needs of adolescents, the findings of this study highlighted the evolving support needs of pupils as they aged and became more independent with reflections on additional support as a form of additional control occasionally unwanted or excessive, ambiguously ‘desirable and undesirable’ (ibid).

Research which elicited pupil perspectives on the nature and character of assistant learning support confirmed a range of positive perceptions and the high

value of support, balanced with the contrasting detrimental personal impacts of receiving inappropriate levels of support. In Webster and Blatchford's SENSE study (2019), pupils characterised effective TA support as being given space to independently participate in learning, with one pupil expressing *"it feels like cheating ... if they are writing down everything for me"* (Webster and Blatchford, 2019,8).

Moreover, other research suggested that CAs can unintentionally act as a barrier to pupil participation and restrict the accessibility of the curriculum in a number of ways. Some authors (Blatchford et al., 2012; Giangreco, 2013; 2021) have argued that individual CAs are not responsible for this effect. Rather, they pointed to prevailing structural issues, including CA deployment patterns. Further studies have identified a form of classroom segregation and stigmatisation which sees those pupils allocated CA support cut off from their peers (Howes, 2003; Giangreco et al., 2007; Ward, 2011). Such research demonstrated that, inadvertently, CAs can assume or be assigned the role of primary educator for pupils with SEN (Giangreco, 2009; Webster et al., 2011; Fisher and Pleasants, 2012; Sharma and Salend, 2016). Interpretation of the DISS study (Blatchford et al., 2012) indicated that CAs were increasingly assuming enhanced levels of responsibility for the teaching and learning of pupils with SEN as their 'primary educators', with this practice more noticeable in post-primary settings.

"In secondary schools in particular, that teachers did not always fully understand or appreciate the roles and remits of TAs and other support staff, and this could influence their deployment decisions in the classroom"
(Blatchford et al., 2012, 72).

Numerous authors questioned the appropriateness of this deployment model as an alternative to input by a qualified classroom teacher (Carter et al., 2009; Giangreco, 2011; Sharples et al., 2015) with subsequent research suggested that this anomaly commonly occurred when teachers ascribed the TA as ‘the expert on the child’ (Webster, 2014).

2.2.2 Pastoral, Social and Behavioural Support

Empirical research has highlighted the contribution of CAs as caregivers within education, providing informal support for pupils in a wide range of ways (Edmond and Price, 2009; Dillow, 2010; Zhao et al., 2021). A key facet of the DISS study aimed to evaluate the impact of TA support on a range of Positive Approaches to Learning (PAL), with evidence of positive outcomes for Year 9 classes in secondary schools (Year 10 in NI). The authors suggested that a useful role for assistants was through indirect support for pupil well-being and development, including pupil confidence, motivation, independence, and relationships (Blatchford et al., 2009). Furthermore, Iadarola et al., (2015) investigating parent and teacher perceptions of supports for pupils with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) across a sample of schools in three urban districts of the USA found that parents had positive perceptions of paraprofessionals’ increased understanding of pupils’ backgrounds. This finding was also noted in the US and UK based studies (Healy, 2011; Symes and Humphrey, 2011) which reported the benefits of familiar and supportive relationships that provided a level of routine and predictability within the classroom for pupils. Elsewhere, a Norwegian study of classroom support for pupils with Down’s syndrome found that TAs had a particular role in providing assistance to pupils by guiding and coaching them through social activities during break times, optimising

participation and interaction with peers and making important accommodation for pupils' cognitive difficulties (Dolva et al., 2011).

Studies which examined pupil perspectives of CA support are useful in characterising the pastoral dimensions of assistant supports (Broer et al., 2005; Fraser and Meadows, 2008; Tews and Lupart 2008; Rutherford, 2012; Bland and Sleightholme, 2012; Opie et al., 2017; Pinkard, 2021). Broer et al.'s (2005, 415) early qualitative study reported pupils' perception of the role of the paraprofessionals as that of 'a mother, friend, protector and primary teacher' and emphasised the importance of nurturing relationships within inclusive environments. A recent qualitative study (Pinkard 2021) exploring pupils' experiences of their individual teaching assistant support reported pupil perspectives of a range of positive benefits to the school experience including support for their inclusion and emotional well-being, soothing of anxiety and the promotion of positive coping strategies.

Moreover, facilitating interaction has also been reported as a key responsibility for assistants (Moran and Abbott, 2002; Giangreco and Broer, 2007, Symes and Humphrey, 2011) with the provision of informal support aiding pupil communication and interaction with classroom teachers and peers, and fostering more meaningful pupil participation. In this vein, CAs are often conceptualised as connectors for children and young people (Howes, 2003; Chopra, 2004; Cajkler et al., 2007), functioning to forge networks of support between peers, parents, educators and the wider community. Indeed, Fisher and Pleasants (2012), undertaking a US-state-wide survey of the paraeducator role, found that providing behavioural and social supports to pupils rather than instructional support was the primary role for paraeducators.

Empirical studies (Howard and Ford, 2007; Cajkler and Tennant, 2009; Healy, 2011; Clarke, 2021; 2021a) have identified a further evolution of the assistant role to include behaviour management. This can involve a wide range of duties, including modelling behavioural responses, removing pupils from the environment and de-escalation of behavioural incidents (Healy, 2011). Thus far, this is still a relatively under-researched area (Cajkler and Tennant, 2009; Clarke and Visser, 2021; Griffith and Blatchford, 2021), specifically within the post-primary context.

Despite mixed evidence on the role, deployment and impact of this workforce, research has shown that the role of assistants is highly valued by a range of stakeholders including, teachers (Blatchford et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2021), parents (NICCY, 2020; Zhao et al., 2021), and pupils (Mortier et al., 2011; Rutherford, 2012; Pinkard, 2021). Critical commentary (Sikes et al., 2007; Sharma and Salend, 2016; Giangreco, 2021) advances the argument that reliance on pupil support models with high levels of CA support contributes to the development of a currency of CA hours, an option regularly sought by parents. This is conceptualised as Webster (2014) as follows:

“Statement = hours = one-to-one support = pupil’s needs met” (Webster, 2014, 233).

A persistent argument advanced by some researchers is that the inappropriate deployment of assistants in educational settings masks much more significant problems in the conceptualisation and development of supports for pupils with disabilities: paradoxically serving to inadvertently undermine educational inclusion (Giangreco, 2013; Sharma and Salend, 2016; Giangreco, 2021; Webster 2022).

“... too often teacher assistants are not used wisely in inclusive classrooms, but rather metaphorically as a bandaid for an injury that at the least requires stitches and possibly major surgery; no bandaid, regardless of size or type , will meet the need” (Giangreco, 2013, 94).

In light of the mixed evidence and competing discourses on the appropriate role for assistants, it is imperative to improve local understanding on the work of CAs as practitioners within inclusive classrooms. While much is known about the work of assistants through comparative models of deployment internationally, little is known about the work of assistants in NI. Specifically, there is limited knowledge about the work of assistants at post-primary level.

2.3 Preparation of CAs for Inclusive Classrooms

The preparation of assistants for inclusive classrooms is a longstanding, unresolved issue, reflected in international, national and regional research literature (Cajkler et al., 2007a; Abbott et al., 2011, Kerins et al., 2018). The level, type and nature of preparation required for CAs to effectively assume their diverse, complex and expanding roles is crucial for educational inclusion; paradoxically, this contrasts with characterisation of assistants as ‘the least qualified member of staff supporting the pupils with the greatest needs’ (Blatchford et al., 2012). The authors argued that higher levels of pedagogical skills are required to meet the needs of the diverse profile of pupils with SEN. However, whilst there is a wide agreement that preparation for assistants is essential, there is less consensus on the nature, format and content of the training. The following section will summarise findings in relevant empirical literature relating the preparation of assistants to support pupils with SEN in mainstream, particularly within post-primary schools. It presents a

synthesis of empirical research and NI policy literature relating to the preparation for CAs, including, training and professional development and collaboration with teachers.

2.3.1 Vocational Classroom Assistant Training

A growing body of literature has highlighted international trends on limited levels of pre-service preparation for CAs (Blatchford et al., 2012). In contrast to teaching, which is a graduate profession requiring completion of accredited teacher training and qualified status, entry into CA roles requires minimal knowledge, qualification, and experience levels. A small number of empirical studies have explored knowledge and competency requirements for CAs working to support pupils with SEN, although the scope of these has been limited. For example, a US questionnaire completed by 118 paraprofessionals working across elementary and secondary schools (Carter et al., 2009) investigated knowledge standards and training content. Using self-reported data, the findings suggested that paraprofessionals had varied levels of knowledge across a set of basic, established professional standards (CEC, 2004) which included relevant knowledge within special education, instructional strategies, and ethical practice.

Limited knowledge and skills requirements among the assistant workforce have led to concerns about the capacity of schools and support staff to fully meet the complex needs of pupils with SEN, in addition to fulfilling the ideals of inclusive practice (O'Connor and Hansson, 2012; NICCY, 2020).

“TA support can also be inequitable as students who do not have a disability or special educational need receive instruction from a qualified teacher, while students with a disability or special need receive instruction, including

primary instruction, from a TA, with no guarantee of qualifications” (Butt, 2019, 218).

Whilst there are minimal entry requirements for CAs at policy level (Rose, 2020), variable vocational qualifications are specified across jurisdictions, typically provided in collaboration between the tertiary education sector and local schools. A review of policy and research on the role of CA in NI, highlighted the uncertain educational requirements for the CA post (O’Connor and Hansson, 2012). At present, the JNC circular No34 (EA, 2021) used by schools in the appointment of CAs comprises a list of 75 qualifications, ranging from level 2 qualifications across fields of study including education, childcare and health and social care, (e.g., NVQ 2 Childcare and Education), to more specific higher-level qualifications at degree level (e.g., BA Degree Education Studies and Special and Inclusive Needs) and teacher education programmes (e.g., Teaching qualification, recognised by GTCNI) (JNC, 2021). Such a range contrasts with the specifications of job descriptions (Appendix 2) which typically mandate school leaving qualifications at GCSE level as a requirement for the post. O’Connor and Hansson (2012) highlighted variability in qualifications required for assistant posts in NI, suggesting that due to the minimal requirements a person as young as 16 or 17 with limited knowledge and skills could be employed to provide support to pupils with SEN. Significantly, while educational policy underscores the importance of training for CAs (DE, 2009; DE, 2011), job descriptions have evidenced low expectations for additional or specific SEN qualifications as a desirable criterion for appointment (Appendix two).

Regionally, there are a limited number of vocational training courses, evolved from the NNEB training course for nursery assistants, which prospective CAs can undertake in preparation for employment. Such courses typically utilise an

apprenticeship model, with students required to undertake a placement for the duration of their studies (Moran and Abbott, 2002). Research by Doherty (2004) evidenced access to accredited CA vocational qualifications within the further and higher education sectors, including level 2 and level 3 awards in courses including: Children's Care, Learning and Development, and Specialist Support for Teaching and Learning which continue to be offered regionally through FE Colleges. In addition to this, Stranmillis University College currently provide a professional development programme for CAs. The programme currently consists of six units covering innovative themes such as 'supporting the child's social learning, resilience and well-being', 'planning for learning', 'teaching and the law', 'the new code of practice', 'the autism spectrum' and 'working with teachers and learning managers'.⁵ The course aims to enhance the confidence of CAs with a focus on developing understanding and skills to mentor individual pupil, in addition to, working with the teacher to develop new cognitive skills (Stranmillis University College, 2021).

Moreover, for those wishing to pursue higher level qualifications, there are a number of postgraduate qualifications available on a flexible basis at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) for education professionals and practitioners. At present, the postgraduate MEd Inclusion and Special Educational Needs is a professionally based degree which aims to enhance professional practice across the education sector 'whether you are a classroom assistant, SENCO or university lecturer' and is accessible to CAs with requisite university qualifications.⁶ Previous research (Moran and Abbott, 2002, 2006; Abbott et al., 2011) which examined the professional needs of assistants across the primary, secondary and special sectors in NI confirmed the eclectic mix of CA qualifications, and provided insight into School Leader

⁵ <https://www.stran.ac.uk/courses/professional-development/learning-support/>

⁶ <https://www.qub.ac.uk/courses/postgraduate-taught/inclusion-special-educational-needs-med/>

perceptions of the value of vocational study for CAs. Significantly, school leaders within the post-primary phase reported that CA qualifications were insufficient to meet the support requirements for adolescent pupils due to their limited coverage of SEN conditions and narrow focus on the primary sector. Alternatively, school leaders stressed the importance of personal attributes in the appointment of CAs, such as interpersonal skills, discretion, the practical ability to assist, empathy, team working, use of initiative, patience and enthusiasm for working with children (Moran and Abbott, 2006).

Taken collectively, and in consideration with the evolution and expansion of the CA role, it is necessary to examine the ways in which they typically prepare for their roles in inclusive classrooms, specifically to understand their perceptions of qualification and training in the post-primary phase.

2.4 Classroom Assistants as Paraprofessionals

This section provides an overview of empirical and policy literature on CAs as paraprofessional workers. The growth of the CA workforce can be viewed in the wider deployment context of paraprofessional workers within the public sector (Blatchford and Webster, 2012). Whilst the terms ‘paraprofessional’ and ‘paraeducator’ are common role titles for assistants working in classrooms in the US (Conley et al., 2010), in a broader economic context, ‘paraprofessional’ denote a distinct type of occupational activity. A paraprofessional has come to be understood as a trained but not professionally certified employee. The term is increasingly applied to a growing cadre of support staff personnel or auxiliary workers employed to work alongside and in support of existing professions. Bishop (2021, 199) advanced a definition of paraprofessionals as near-professionals or ‘those who in

some way occupy the margins of accepted professional status' within educational and other occupational fields. Increasingly, paraprofessional roles have proliferated across the public services within advanced economies. In the UK, comparable roles include paramedics and health care assistants (HCAs) in medicine, personal assistants (PAs) in health and social care settings, paralegals with the legal profession and community support officers within the police service (Fitzpatrick and Roberts, 2004; Bach, Kessler and Heron, 2007; Bosley and Dale, 2008; Webb, 2011; Vail et al., 2011; Bach et al., 2012; Cosgrove, 2016; Eaton et al., 2020).

The paraprofessional role originated from neo-liberal ideology and economic reform associated with models of new public management (Bach et al., 2007) which aimed to reorient public services onto a more efficient, cost-effective, and transactional, user focused basis (Kubiak, 2010). This approach has been prioritised within the public service modernisation agenda in the UK government since the 1990s. Bach, Kessler, and Heron, (2004) suggested this development supported the belief that established professional fields should be challenged in their attitudes and practices and redefined towards continual development and flexibility. Analysis of the small body of work within the field of 'paraprofessional studies' (Bach et al., 2004; Kessler et al., 2006; Bach, Kessler and Heron, 2007; Kubiak, 2010) identified key areas of commonality within the reconfiguration of workplace structures in the UK, particularly in the health and social care and education sectors. These include:

- Use of paraprofessionals as a cost-effective way to address expenditure and labour supply (Bach et al., 2007; Kubiak, 2010).
- Occupational boundary blurring in which support staff undertake tasks which were previously under the exclusive remit of professionals (Bach, Kessler

and Heron, 2004) leading to professional ‘withdrawal into paperwork, reports and auditing’ and the paraprofessional deployed to fulfil the ‘basic front-line work’ (Kubiak, 2010, 126).

- Scientific management approaches to the division of labour between the professional and the paraprofessional based on the presumption that paraprofessionals can relieve professional staff of routine care or administrative duties which thus frees professionals to undertake more complex work at the core of their profession (Bach et al., 2006; Bach et al., 2007; Kubiak, 2010; Edgell and Granter, 2019).
- The reorientation of service users as active citizens, with increasingly complex needs and entitlements to quality provision and personalisation (Kubiak, 2010) within the choice and standards agendas (Bach, Kessler, and Heron, 2004; Kessler et al., 2006).
- Higher public expectations, legislation, and professional standards, contributing to a culture of litigation and requirements of paraprofessional registration (Bach et al., 2007; Kubiak, 2010).
- Informal professional learning models for paraprofessionals based on access and interaction with skilled others, a lack of standardised training for paraprofessionals with the perception of invalidation of the necessity of formal educational requirements (Bach et al., 2004; Kessler et al., 2006).
- Limited training in supervision for professionals leading to inadequate supervision and support due to professional workloads (Bach et al., 2007; Kubiak, 2010).

In this context, it is argued that CAs, as paraprofessionals, could undertake roles in education as part of a reorganisation of teacher roles. Within such a reform agenda, those duties which were seen as routine or low skilled have been reallocated to assistants as lower skilled supervised workers. Blatchford et al., (2012) suggested this represented an attempt to challenge the market-cornering of professionals within education. However, there is some concern about the relative expense of the employment of paraprofessionals. Qualified Teaching professionals acquire a higher status and are viewed as a costly recruitment, requiring extensive investment in high levels of graduate training, professional development, and expertise. Assistants, in contrast, are viewed as cheaper workers, with lower levels of skill and expertise, requiring less investment in training and professional development. As such, they are seen to represent a readily available source of labour (Hancock and Eyres, 2004), with lower operational costs for public services (Blatchford et al., 2012).

2.4.1 CA Conditions of Employment

The ad hoc development of the CA role and the flexible pupil-based nature of their work has often led to less favourable working conditions for assistants (Giangreco, 2010; Bishop, 2021). A key theme within empirical literature contrasts self-reported job satisfaction among CAs relative to their terms and conditions of employment. Fisher and Pleasants (2012) identified respect from teaching colleagues, acknowledgement of opinions about pupils, active team membership and institutional collaborative culture, alongside remuneration as key determinants influencing paraeducator perceptions of job satisfaction. A questionnaire study undertaken in one rural English Secondary school (Hammett and Burton, 2005) found that the majority of Learning Support Assistants (LSA) reported navigating

insecure employment in the form of part-time temporary contracts to be a particular stressor, particularly the limited hours of work and insecure working contracts due to the funding constraints and the need to reapply for their jobs each year. Blatchford et al., (2012) reported that TAs in England and Wales were typically employed on a mix of temporary and permanent contracts, reporting how evidence of TAs ‘goodwill’ led to working of additional unpaid hours outside their contract to facilitate teacher collaboration, meetings and planning activities. To date, the conditions of employment for CA represents a particular gap in regional research, with little information available on this facet of experience for assistants.

2.4.2 CA Renumeration

International research has highlighted negative CA perceptions of the level of renumeration for their work (Howard and Ford, 2007; Giangreco, 2010; Lehane 2015, Roffey-Bartensen and Watt 2015). In an analysis of assistant roles in public services, Bach et al., (2007) found that TA perceptions of job satisfaction, while generally rated as high, tended to be lower than for teachers and social work assistants. This was typically associated with pay disparities and term-time contracts, with teachers and school leaders acknowledging exploitation of TAs through their expanded roles. Indeed, a recurrent finding in qualitative research highlighted an unfavourable comparison between levels of pay for CAs relative to forms of employment requiring minimal qualifications. This was exemplified by a paraeducator participating in Fisher and Pleasants’s (2012) US state-wide survey.

“We have a problem with major turnover each year because the pay is so low – a grocery store checkout person is paid more! We work directly with

the students, yet often the students we work with earn more money at their part-time jobs” (Fisher and Pleasants, 2012, 292).

Anderson and Finney’s (2007) study revealed this as an issue for TAs in UK schools whilst regional research by Moran and Abbott (2002) and Abbott et al., (2011, 224) reiterated the issue of low wages, highlighting school leader reflections of a sense of unfairness in the pay policy as ‘*despite their unquestionable value in the inclusive classroom, TAs received remuneration during term time only*’ (Moran and Abbott, 2002, 224). The perception that low levels of remuneration for CAs as ‘pin money’ for mothers and housewives, was contrasted with the expanding expectations and challenges which the work now requires (Moran and Abbott, 2002). As such, a regional knowledge gap persists in understanding the range of ‘employment challenges’ (Giangreco, Doyle and Suter, 2014, 631) from the CA perspective within the post-primary phase. There is limited scholarship on their status as paraprofessionals in education and their experiences within the wider employment landscape, in particular CA conditions of employment, and perceptions of remuneration.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This section outlines theoretical models informing the study, with consideration of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and the Wider Pedagogical Role Model (WPR) (Webster et al., 2011).

2.5.1 Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Ecological Systems Theory provides an important theoretical framework which aids systematic description of a phenomena and the analysis of the ecological properties of a social environment and the impact on individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.21). Developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917 – 2005) within the study of human development, the theory offers unified but highly differentiated conceptual schema for understanding the structures of the immediate and wider social environment extending beyond the behaviour of individuals to encompass functional systems both within and between settings (ibid). The theory demonstrates the evolving nature and scope of perceived reality for individuals and their active involvement within the physical and social environment (ibid).

Within this systems model, an individual is located at the centre of an ecological framework, presented as ‘a set of nested structures, each inside the next like a set of Russian dolls’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.5). Each successive level acknowledges the range of factors which influence on human development. Accordingly, the constituent elements have independent and collective, as well as direct and indirect impacts on the individual. Extending from the microsystem of the individual’s immediate to the macrosystem context of the wider political environment, the framework provides a comprehensive and interactive conceptual understanding of the complex interplay of factors across multiple spheres of influence which shape development. Significantly, the model demonstrates the interconnections of inter-personal, organisational, community and policy environments and the individual (ibid). In the context of this study, it provides a theoretical framework through which to understand the complex interplay of the wide range of factors which impact the role and deployment of CAs in support for

pupils with SEN. Figure 2.1 presents this framework and its application within this doctoral study.

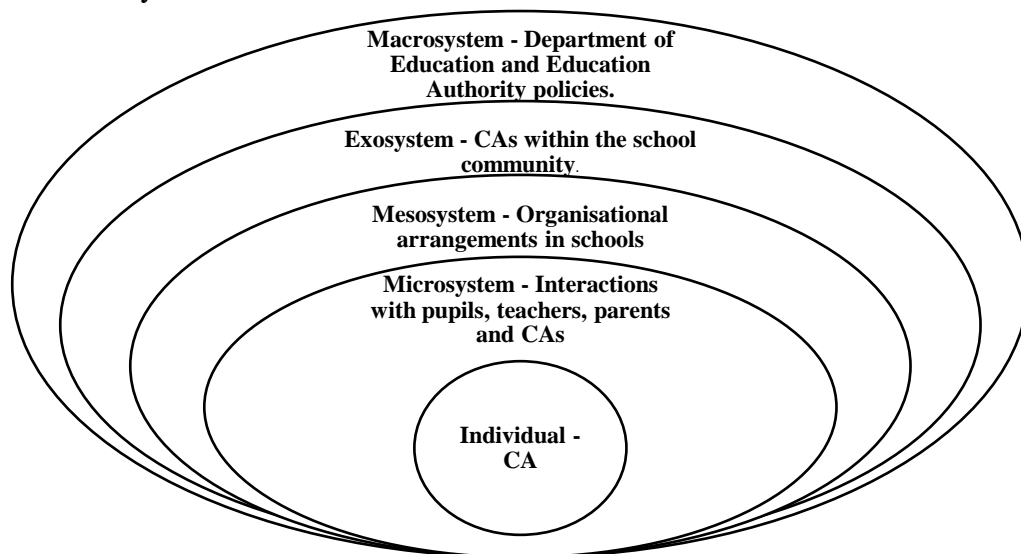


Figure 2.1 Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

At the microsystem level, the individual (the CA) is positioned within the context of the immediate interrelations of the immediate environment (ibid). In this study, this can be seen as their work in classroom settings interacting with teachers, pupils and other members of school staff. At the next level, the mesosystem, Bronfenbrenner posits that individuals can be directly and indirectly influenced by the organisational context of the environment. For Classroom Assistants this is associated with their position within institutional hierarchies, different grades of the CA role, institutional deployment practices and the range of duties allocated to CAs within the classroom setting, arrangements which necessarily shape interactions and relationships between CAs, pupils and teachers.

At the next level of the ecological framework, the exosystem CAs are viewed within the community context. This can be understood as the wider sectoral environment in which CAs are not directly involved but which structures their work in schools. This could include a wide array of influences, for example, pupil

interactions with parents, or other members of the school community such as Education Authority (EA) external support services, training providers or union representatives. Finally, at the outermost level, the macrosystem, Bronfenbrenner seeks to account for the expansive context of the ideological, structural and cultural norms within society and the impact on the individual (ibid). In this study, the role of CAs and their practice in classrooms will be directly and indirectly influenced by factors such as the workings of governing bodies such as the Department of Education (DE) and EA, educational policy, or the culture of inclusive education.

It is clear that the substantive themes explored throughout this chapter have a close association with this model. The emphasis on the interconnection of the ecological structures as both directly and indirectly influential and viewed ‘as decisive for development within a given setting’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.5) is highly relevant to the examination of the historical development of the CA role and its continued prominence within international research literature. In particular, the model demonstrates linkages between societal policy environments and the individual (ibid). This framework provides a relevant model, drawing together the range of influences examined throughout the literature review which have contributed to the historical development of the CA role, and its current ambiguous status within special and inclusive education.

2.5.2 The Wider Pedagogical Role (WPR) model

Of particular significance to this doctoral research is the series of studies by researchers at University College London (UCL), starting with the influential Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) (Blatchford et al., 2012). As one of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) key studies over its forty-year history, it is acknowledged as a ‘formidably extensive’ (Fletcher-Campbell, 2010, 339), wide ranging and comprehensive piece of longitudinal research over the period 2003 – 2008 (Balshaw, 2010), making a significant contribution to the field of educational inclusion. This research is acknowledged for the extensive scope and comprehensive methodology as the largest study to date on the assistant workforce. As a naturalistic study, DISS aimed to provide ‘an accurate, systematic and representative description of the types of support staff in schools’ and to ‘assess the impact or effect on teachers, teaching and pupil learning and behaviour’ (Blatchford et al., 2012, 18) through the triangulation of over 18,000 questionnaires, 1,600 support staff time logs, and the collation of pupil assessment data with case study and observational data across a national sample of schools in England and Wales.

The DISS reported widely in its findings, providing a detailed description of the work of TAs and an evaluation of their impact on a range of pupil and teacher outcomes. It found evidence that TAs had a positive impact on teacher workload, job satisfaction and stress levels, as well as benefitting teaching through higher levels of individual attention to pupils and enhanced classroom control (Blatchford et al., 2012). In addition, there was mixed evidence of impact on ‘positive approaches to learning’ (PAL), a measure developed to evaluate the effect of TA support on pupil behaviour and engagement in learning across eight dimensions including distraction; confidence; motivation; disputation; independence; relationships with other pupils;

task completion; and following instructions (ibid). Of significance to this doctoral study is the fact that a positive statistically significant relationship between high levels of TA support and ‘PAL’ was found across all dimensions only at secondary level in year 9 (year 10) for pupils aged 13- 14.

“The largest effect was a change towards being less distracted, which was 11 times more likely with high levels of TA support. High levels of TA support led to pupils being nine times more likely to develop good relationships with peers, become more independent and become less disruptive. Pupils were seven times more likely to become confident, six more times likely to follow instructions, four more times likely to become motivated and three times more likely to complete work” (Blatchford et al., 2012, 37).

In contrast to this discrete finding, the study concluded that the TA role had evolved into ‘a direct instructional, frontline pedagogical role’ which was routinely deployed to support low attaining pupils and those with SEN on an individual or small group basis, inside and outside the classroom, resulting in pupils becoming separated from the teacher and mainstream curriculum (Blatchford et al., 2012, 119). Added to this was a significant ‘disappointing, even depressing’ (Fletcher-Campbell, 2010, 339; Balshaw, 2010) finding of a ‘consistent negative relationship between the amount of support from TAs and pupils’ academic progress’ (Blatchford et al., 2012, 42). This finding has been further developed in light of subsequent research into a key area of contention for researchers, policymakers, and educationalists.

“... students who receive high amounts of support from TAs receive a different and less effective pedagogical diet. TAs assume much of the responsibility for moment-by-moment pedagogical decision-making for these

students and provide a high amount of verbal differentiation. They do this in part to make classroom teaching accessible, but also to compensate for the teachers' failure to make appropriate adjustments" (Webster & Blatchford, 2020, 385).

While DISS made an important contribution to knowledge about the assistant workforce in England and Wales on a national scale, particularly assessment of the impact of this resource on pupil academic outcomes, there are a number of criticisms of the study. Firstly, it has been suggested that one of the limitations of such large-scale studies is that it places limited importance on the voice and perspective of assistants. Lehane (2013) points to the limited engagement of TAs as participants and as stakeholders within the research process. The first phase of the research was a large-scale survey of schools in England and Wales over the period 2005 - 2008 featuring three questionnaires for school leaders, teachers, and support staff (Blatchford et al., 2009). Questionnaire responses from TAs made up approximately a quarter of the total questionnaire responses (24%) (Blatchford et al., 2012). At the second multi-method phase, 19% (n=310) of the work pattern diaries analysed were TAs and less than a fifth (19.2%; n=114) of case study interviews were with TAs (ibid, 145). Moreover, the main pupil support survey which measured the effects of TA support on pupil outcomes, relied upon impressionistic teacher ratings of the amount of support provided by TAs, and the observed improvements in, pupils' positive approaches to learning (Fletcher-Campbell, 2010). Additionally, it is notable that TAs were excluded from stakeholder working groups to explore the findings and develop the WPR framework (Blatchford et al., 2012). Balshaw (2010) and Saddler (2014) highlight the further limitations, namely, the critical omission of 'the conditions for positive communities of practice' (Balshaw, 2010, 337) and the lack

of qualitative data from TAs themselves about the social aspect of pupils' support (Saddler, 2014).

Further critique is focused on the perceived deficit model of SEN underpinning the research, which is suggested as adopting a reductive view of the functional role of the TA supporting pupils with Statements of SEN viewed as 'an inconvenience to the system' (Fletcher-Campbell, 2011, 339). Within this one-dimensional view of educational inclusion, it is suggested that the DISS study focused exclusively on pupil academic attainment, at the expense of a broader understanding of social or affective inclusion (Saddler, 2014). Notwithstanding such criticism, the DISS research led to the development of the Wider Pedagogical Role (WPR) framework to interpret the DISS findings and to provide a contextualised model for understanding the work of assistants at a systems-level. The authors stress that the DISS findings are not attributable to the assistant workforce, instead they can be explained through the wider situational and structural context within which TAs work and over which they have no control, often reflecting stakeholder decisions made about TAs rather than those made with or by TAs (Webster and Blatchford, 2020). This framework, alongside the Ecological Systems Model, has explicit relevance to this doctoral research, specifically in the attempt to identify structural features of the CA employment landscape which influence the capacity of CAs to support pupils with statements of Special Education Needs. The WPR framework is presented in figure 2.2 and the components explored in detail.

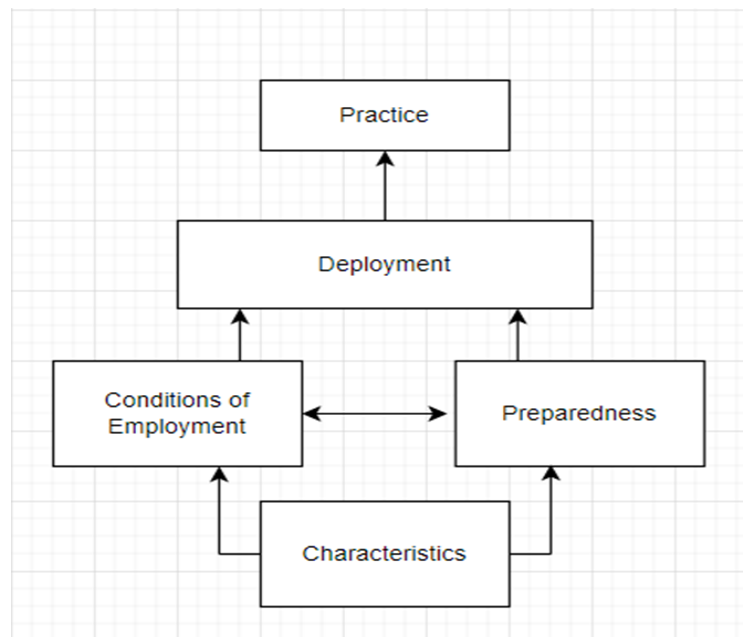


Figure 2.2 The Wider Pedagogical Role (WPR) model (Webster et al., 2011)

While similarities have been suggested in the earlier work of Watkinson (2003), identifying the interrelated constituents in TA support mechanisms (Lehane, 2013), and the longstanding issues for assistants described by Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter (2010), the WPR model, nonetheless, offers a useful organisational framework for descriptive research on the work of assistants (Webster et al., 2011; Cockcroft and Atkinson, 2015). Webster et al (2011) used this model to draw attention to the wider context of TA support through five key facets: TA characteristics; conditions of employment; preparedness; deployment; and practice, which collectively are suggested to influence assistant support and account for their impact on the pupil outcomes.

Firstly, TA *characteristics* included information about the demographic profile of assistants including gender, ethnicity and age, highest level of qualification in education and length of experience. The second facet of the model was a consideration of *conditions of employment* and management of assistants such as: levels of job satisfaction, average hours worked, pay and contractual terms as well as

supervision and appraisal arrangements. Both TA characteristics and conditions of employment components of the framework were viewed as distal elements of the WRP model and thus to the effectiveness of assistant support, with greater importance and focus placed on the following three facets (Blatchford et al., 2012, 55).

Preparedness as the third component of the WPR model (Webster et al., 2011) focused on two key elements of preparation for assistants: training and professional development for both TAs and teachers, and TA involvement in daily planning and preparation in advance of lessons. As the fourth component, *deployment* explored descriptions of the work undertaken by TAs. The final component *practice* examined the nature of TA interactions with pupils. In short, the model can be seen to represent a refinement of substantive research themes, usefully summarised as the ‘TA conundrum’ (Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle, 2010, Giangreco, 2013; 2021) focusing on their role in classrooms, training for assistants and status as paraprofessional workers.

“The TA conundrum that explores the varying combinations of TAs preparedness for instruction, instructional roles, and compensation commensurate with teacher-type instructional roles, where all combinations result in unfavourable outcomes (e.g., TA feelings of ambivalence, exploitation, frustration, disrespect; legal and ethical concerns; questionable resource utilisation” (Giangreco, 2021, 280).

Arguably, the WPR framework has provided a valid structure through which to organise the foundational themes within international literature CAs and their work in inclusive classrooms. The DISS landmark study and its interpretative WPR

framework have been complemented by subsequent research which explores the educational experiences of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in English mainstream schools. The Making a Statement project (MAST) (Webster and Blatchford, 2013) within the primary sector and Special Educational Needs in Secondary Education (SENSE) (Webster and Blatchford, 2019) provided further insight through the experiential lens of pupils. The latter, a qualitative study of the daily experiences of adolescent pupils with SEND attending a sample (n=43) of secondary schools in England was undertaken through a multi-method approach combining systematic observations and qualitative case studies. The study concluded that employment and deployment of TAs comprised a key strategic approach to the inclusion of pupils with SEN in the post-primary sector, reflecting parents' and teachers' perceptions that these pupils would be unable to cope in mainstream classroom without the support of a TA (Webster and Blatchford, 2019).

In summary, the Wider Pedagogical Role (WPR) model was identified as a key element of the theoretical framework underpinning this study due to its prominence as one of a small number of theoretical approaches to the work of CAs, in addition to, its significance in the development in the field of Classroom Assistant research and literature. Despite its criticisms, it was developed as a model to support baseline description of the support staff workforce and to act as an explanatory model through which to evaluate TA effectiveness within the English and Welsh education systems. It is relevant to current research as an organisational model structuring a comprehensive description of the experiences and perspectives of CAs in NI. In the absence of a comprehensive review of the CA workforce regionally, the WPR outlines the key facets of the work of CAs worthy of further examination. Taken together, the literature review has established the rationale for doctoral

research focused on the three overarching themes of the CA role (deployment information and CA practice), preparation and experience as paraprofessionals in education (conditions of employment).

2.6 Conclusion

Chapter Two sought to present a structured review of international, national, and regional empirical and policy literature on the work of assistants in order to establish the grounding for the current study investigating the experiences and perceptions of CAs supporting pupils with SEN in mainstream post-primary schools in NI. The chapter provided an overview of the contested concepts of SEN and inclusive education as well as the historical development of CAs in NI. Utilising Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and the WPR model (Webster et al., 2011) the review established a focus on three key areas, presenting critical gaps in knowledge relating to the regional CA post-primary workforce. These areas included the role of assistants; preparation for assistants; and CAs as paraprofessionals. The review has established a rationale for the research questions and the following chapter will address these in more detail through a detailed research methodology.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.0 Chapter Outline

"Methodology refers to the theory of getting knowledge, to the consideration of the best ways, methods or procedures by which data that will provide the evidence basis for the construction of knowledge about whatever it is that is being researched is obtained. The methodology is concerned with the description and analysis of research methods rather than with the actual, practical use of those methods. Methodological work is, therefore, philosophical, thinking, work" (Opie, 2004, 16).

This chapter opens with a definition of methodology, highlighting the importance of the development of a philosophically informed and well-designed research framework which links each facet of research design to the research approach.

Methodological coherence required careful consideration, ensuring that the methods and data collection aligned with the research aim and questions. Designing empirical research requires the researcher to think deeply and critically about their assumptions concerning the nature of knowledge and social reality, as well as developing the research to speak with one's own voice and calibrating one's own methodological compass (Punch and Oancea, 2014).

The chapter provides an overview of the design, conduct and analysis of this doctoral research. The starting point is an examination of the philosophical building blocks of research: ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods (Grix, 2018). It outlines the pragmatic orientation of the research and is detailed through a framework structured around a sequential mixed method study combining

quantitative and qualitative methods. The research methodologies employed in this study are presented with a description of the design, sampling, piloting, data collection and analysis procedure. The chapter then presents an examination of key methodological issues at the core of doctoral research: ethical considerations and rigour.

3.1 Research Questions and Philosophical Orientation

Methodology proceeds from an understanding of what it means to conduct research, clarifying the values and assumptions of the researcher about the fundamental issues of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and value ethics. The philosophical position adopted in research determines the kinds of research considered worth doing, the kinds of questions worth asking and the most appropriate methods used to collect the data (Coe, 2017). This chapter opens with an examination of these core concepts within the positivist-interpretivist paradigmatic debate of educational research.

In the exploration and development of the methodology for this study, the researcher was primarily guided by the research aim and the research questions. The primary aim of the study was *to investigate the experiences and perceptions of CAs employed in post-primary schools to support pupils with SEN in Northern Ireland*. This aim was addressed through the following research questions.

1. How do CAs describe and characterise their classroom support role in post-primary settings?
2. How do CAs prepare for their work in post-primary settings?
3. What are CA's perceptions of their conditions of employment as paraprofessionals within the educational workforce?

4. What does this research tell us about the contribution of CAs in supporting pupils with statements of SEN in post-primary settings?

The study sought to elicit and prioritise the perspective of CAs, adopting a broad, exploratory, and descriptive focus to address key gaps in local knowledge relating to the work of CAs at post-primary level.

3.1.1 Philosophical Paradigms in Educational Research

Within educational research, it is understood that the individual's world-view, general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study (Creswell, 2014), underpins, and informs much thinking on its design, development, and interpretation. It is important at the outset to examine the world-views aligned to various approaches to empirical inquiry.

Educational research is defined by paradigmatic pluralism and multiple ways of construing such paradigms (Cohen et al., 2017). Careful consideration is, therefore, required in the selection of the most appropriate methodological approach to best address the overall aim and research questions. Research methodology originates from the researcher's choice of a research paradigm within two competing theoretical traditions: positivism and interpretivism. Each paradigm holds opposing ontological and epistemological positions, methodological principles, and norms of practice (Punch and Oancea, 2014). Ontology (the nature of reality) and epistemology (nature of knowledge) in turn inform the selection of tools and methods used to best address the research questions (Grix, 2018).

Positivism is considered the underpinning philosophy of the scientific method which advances an external, singular, and objective social reality (Cohen et al., 2017). Within this realist perspective, the world and social phenomena are real

and exist independent of perception (Coe, 2017). Moreover, the world is viewed as ordered and predictable, rational, and objective, with positivist inquiry revealing universal laws and patterns of behaviour (ibid). Consequently, positivist scholarship relies on the assumption that all genuine knowledge is based on sensory experience and can only be advanced through quantitative approaches involving careful observation, measurement, and experimentation and hypothesis testing (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Positivism positions the researcher as an objective and disinterested observer (Cohen et al., 2017) with a singular truth to be discovered through inquiry which is independent of the values and beliefs of the researcher. Furthermore, within this orientation, power relationships between researchers and the research object are not relevant to the truth (Coe, 2017). Positivist research seeks data which can be used to generalise explanations, support predictions, and develop and test hypotheses. Data generated in this approach is typically quantitative in nature, expressed in statistical or numerical form.

In contrast, the interpretivist or constructivist paradigm emerged to address the perceived limitations of the scientific world-view. This approach views reality as socially constructed by individuals who create subjective constructions of their social world informed by their personal and historical perspectives (Crotty, 1998). This world-view holds that there is no reality independent of perception and, therefore, it can only be understood holistically through interaction with situational and contextual specificity (Coe, 2017). Knowledge is, therefore, subjective, and open to multiple meanings and interpretations. This paradigm positions the researcher as a fellow participant in the research process working to "understand, explain and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants" (Cohen et al., 2017, 245). Understanding the values and beliefs of the researcher is crucial to the

development of knowledge claims through the interaction of researcher and participants.

Adherents of the interpretivist paradigm seek understanding, with the aim of exploring individual cases and situations in order to focus on the meaning made by different social actors in social contexts (Coe, 2017). Such cases are understood as not generalizable to wider populations, with individual cases held as unique, requiring rich qualitative description to capture their essence and rich meaning (ibid). Much classroom research is located in the interpretivist dimension with numerous studies of classroom assistants have undertaken within this paradigm (Dillow, 2010; MacKenzie, 2011; Lehane, 2016; Lee, 2021) where the perceptions of key stakeholders are often sought to enhance understanding of the intricacies of classroom support.

3.1.2 Pragmatism

Greene (2008, 8) describes pragmatism as "a leading contender for the philosophical champion of the mixed methods arena" transcending the positivist-interpretivist debate. Since its emergence in the late twentieth century, pragmatism has been employed as a philosophical underpinning for multi-methodological research (Biesta 2010; Clarke and Visser, 2019). It is defined as the combination of methods, design, and philosophical orientations (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Pragmatism advocates a purposive research design driven by the aims and research questions rather than the choice of a paradigm (Biesta, 2015).

Pragmatism, emerging from the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1877), George Herbert Mead (1934), William James (1907); and John Dewey (1938; 1946) (Scheffler, 1974), argues for the focused attention on the research problem above all

else. Early proponents of this discipline were interested in examining empirical findings and practical consequences resulting in the development of effective approaches to understanding and improving real world phenomena. Pragmatism was hailed for its pluralistic appreciation of social phenomena and goes beyond simple dichotomies such as theory and practice. It focuses on research as a means to resolve problems that present themselves in experience (Dewey, 1938).

Pragmatists have often seen the merits of both sides of the debate and challenged the dominance of the ‘paradigm wars’ (Gage, 1989). Indeed, Pring (2015) argued for a rejection of the dualism of the positivist-interpretivist debate, suggesting that these paradigms should not be viewed as incompatible, instead representing oversimplifications of a complex and complicated real world. The focus of research, he argues, is on its suitability to answer the research questions and the purpose of the study. Pring (2015) and others, therefore, advocated the pragmatic approach as a ‘third paradigm’ within the philosophy of research (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Johnson et al., 2007; Denscombe, 2008; Pring, 2015).

Underpinning this emergent ‘third paradigm’ is a pluralist ontological assumption that reality is both singular, informed by a theory, and multiple, shaped by the perspective of different individuals (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

“Pragmatism argues that there may be both singular and multiple versions of the truth and reality, sometimes subjective and sometimes objective, sometimes scientific, and sometimes humanistic. It is a matter-of-fact approach to life, oriented to the solution of practical problems in the practical world” (Cohen et al., 2017, 245).

The world is taken to be intersubjective, existing in the interaction between its natural and social elements; it, therefore, cannot be studied in isolation since the domains of knowledge and human action intimately connected (Biesta and Burbules, 2003).

A number of the principles of pragmatism which enhance its suitability for educational research and are particularly relevant to this study. In terms of methodology, this translates into a desire to understand multiple perspectives of a problem through multiple sources of data. Researchers, therefore, mix approaches through the combination of both qualitative and quantitative data as the study proceeds. Such a pragmatic approach values both objective and subjective forms of knowledge on a given problem so long as it serves the research purposes. The central premise of pragmatism is that it is practice driven, focused on the research purposes and ‘what works’ with research designs, utilising an eclectic mix of numeric and narrative approaches and data, drawing on all paradigms with the core consideration of fitness for purpose and applicability.

3.2 Research Design and Methods

Mixed methods research, aligned with pragmatism, is the combination of qualitative and quantitative approach within a single study. A comprehensive understanding of this approach necessitates in-depth knowledge of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This section will provide an overview of the ways in which both approaches have been usefully combined and utilized in this doctoral research.

Quantitative research seeks description and explanation of phenomenon in the natural world by collecting numerical data analyzed using mathematically derived methods (Aliaga and Gunderson, 2000). Quantitative methods emphasize

objective measurements, statistical analysis, and hypothesis testing (Mujis, 2010).

Many forms of quantitative research proceed from a hypothesis which, tested through experimentation or measurement, can be accepted, or rejected as true (ibid).

Quantitative research theorizes on the nature of reality in terms of variables and the relationships between them (Cohen et al., 2017).

Quantitative approaches hold much value for educational researchers.

Quantitative data facilitates simple description of large data sets in numerical form (Mujis, 2010). Moreover, quantitative approaches enable the researcher to hypothesize and predict a wide range of phenomena. Finally, non-numerical data such as opinions and attitudes can be expressed in numerical form (Mujis, 2010).

Qualitative research, by contrast, is associated with the interpretivist tradition which places high value on direct experience and meaning.

“Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible... Qualitative research involves a naturalistic approach to the world... studying things in natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, 3).

Within this approach, the researcher can adopt multiple approaches to understanding the meaning and interpretation of participants’ experiences. A key advantage of this approach is that it takes a holistic perspective on a problem under investigation, developing a multi-layered picture informed by multiple perspectives (Clarke and Visser, 2019). Qualitative research is not limited by causal relationships between variables which dominate quantitative approaches. Additionally,

interpretative approaches collect data in natural settings, facilitating a direct interaction with participants in each research context.

It is understood that research in both the quantitative and qualitative traditions hold considerable value for educational research. More specifically, the study of classroom assistants has inspired the use of a wide range of methodological approaches to gain deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives (Cajkler et al., 2007a; Sharma and Salend, 2016), as well as their impact on a range of pupil and teacher outcomes (Cajkler et al., 2007a; Alborz et al., 2009; Blatchford et al., 2012; Sharples et al., 2015). It follows, that combined use of the mixed methods approach holds much potential for educational research, offering a complementary approach to fully explore the CA workforce (Cohen et al., 2017).

3.2.1 Mixed Method Research

This research adopted a mixed method approach offering a comprehensive understanding of phenomena to be obtained through a combination of multiple methods which was best suited to addressing the research problem (Punch and Oancea, 2014; Cohen et al., 2017). As the use of two or more methods of data collection, it offered a triangulated approach to the exploration of the research problem. The fundamental principle of this approach is the combination of different methods to allow researchers to complement the strengths of each approach while also addressing the limitations and biases of one single approach (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2005).

A mixed methods research design must take account of a range of considerations. Firstly, the timing of the data collection as either concurrent or sequentially structured to maximize the value of each phase (Creswell and Plano

Clark, 2017). This is a singular advantage for exploratory research in which an initial phase can provide a foundation for or triangulation of successive data collection and analysis. A second consideration is the weighting of the relative importance of each approach to addressing individual research questions within a conceptual framework. As such, mixed methods research features an equal emphasis on qualitative and quantitative methods or a heightened focus on one method allowing close question to method fit (ibid). A third element of importance is the consideration of when and how each method and its corresponding data can be mixed to offer a plethora of purposeful possibilities to researchers (Punch and Oancea, 2014).

Within the context of this doctoral study, a mixed methods design was considered most appropriate due to the limitations of regional research and a paucity of local knowledge about the work of classroom assistants at post-primary level. Figure 3.1 outlines the exploratory mixed method design frame chosen to structure the research within two sequential phases of data collection.

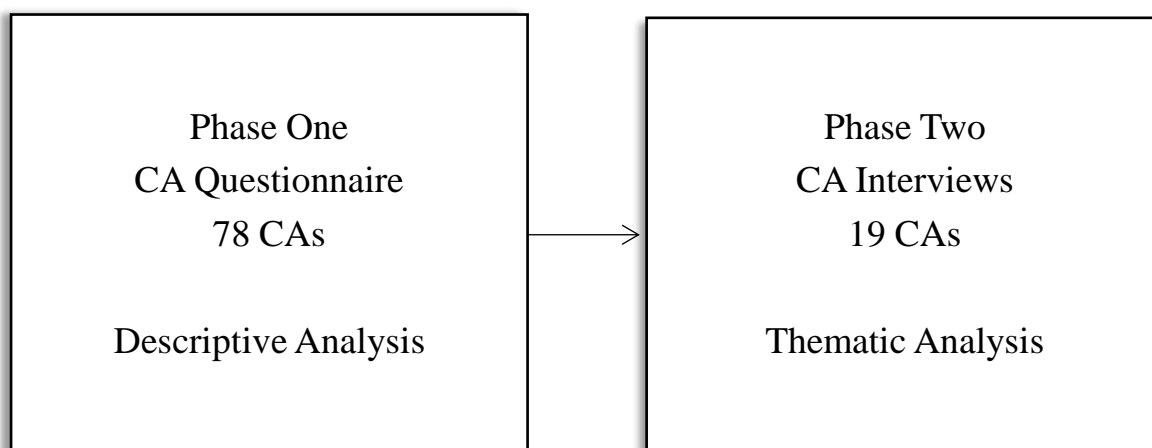


Figure 3.1 Explanatory Sequential Mixed Method Design

A structured, sequential approach to empirical inquiry into this workforce was essential and an initial quantitative survey with qualitative dimensions enabled the collection of a broad descriptive foundation for the research covering a range of topics. These comprised demographic and deployment patterns; assistant role(s) and domains of pupil support; patterns in pre-service and in-service training; and conditions of employment. This broad focus aligned with the theoretical framework outlined in section 2.5.

Additionally, an initial quantitative survey offered scope to develop data in the form of variables from a large representative sample of CAs facilitating examination of the workforce. Analysis of the questionnaire using descriptive statistics sought to produce a body of data which could numerically describe the experience of assistants and provide evidence of baseline information currently absent on this workforce. The intention was to undertake a subsequent qualitative phase of research to complement and extend the initial findings.

In summary, the combination of both research approaches is relevant and purposeful to this exploratory study which seeks to examine the experiences and perception of CAs' support for pupils with SEN at post-primary level as an under-researched area. Both support the development of descriptive research, with conceptual and methodological coherence and connection between each of the constituent phases, offering the potential to generate research findings which address the research questions achieving an in-depth and holistic understanding of a complex social phenomena (Punch and Oancea, 2014). The value of utilising this design frame was the breadth and depth of information yielded across each phase of the research. Moreover, the use of mixed method research allows for a

‘complementarity’ approach to the exploration of the experiences and perceptions of the CA workforce through numerous levels of analysis (Cohen et al., 2017).

3.3 Sampling

This section will outline the sampling methodology and strategy utilised in the research. It will also present an overview of the CA sample achieved and explain some of the challenges in accessing this sub-group of the education workforce in Northern Ireland.

3.3.1 Sampling Methodology

Sampling is a core element of empirical inquiry. As such, it is influenced by a number of issues including access, representativeness, and fitness of purpose. In both quantitative and qualitative studies, sampling requires deliberative and reflexive decision-making, accounting for the number and type of participants invited to contribute (Punch and Oancea, 2014; Cohen et al., 2017). It is widely acknowledged that it is not possible for researchers to ‘study everyone, everywhere doing everything’ (Punch and Oancea, 2014, 210), necessitating the development of a wide range of sampling methods which can establish a coherent logic within the parameters of the research aim and questions.

The need for careful sampling within research design assumes greater importance in mixed method research, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches with differing sampling assumptions and methods. Probability sampling is suggested as the dominant approach within quantitative research which distinguishes between the population under study and devises a valid sample from within this group based on an equal chance of being included within the sample (de Vaus, 2001). Both the size of the sample and its representativeness of the total

population are of key consideration, with a larger sample size offering greater chance of representativeness (Cohen et al., 2017). Within quantitative research, researchers collect and analyse data from a sizable sub-set of the total population in order to generalize findings back to this target group (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007; Punch and Oancea, 2014; Cohen et al, 2017). Qualitative research, by contrast, emphasises the uniqueness of a phenomenon utilizing a plethora of non-probability sampling approaches which guide the researcher in the selection of a particular target group chosen deliberately for its particular features relative to a research question or problem. Within this sampling approach, smaller samples are typical, with a limited aim of generalisation to the wider population. In this type of research, the sample is chosen with the intention that it can only ‘represent itself’ (Cohen et al., 2017, 425).

Once again, these contrasting sampling assumptions have been identified as a false dichotomy (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007), with a growing body of mixed and multi-method research designs challenging traditional sampling approaches. For example, a mixed method sequential design often requires the use of multiple sampling strategies, in which one sampling strategy precedes and influences the other (Creswell, 2018), therefore, require approaches that meet the demands of both quantitative and qualitative phases of the research. Sampling decisions relating to generalisation and sample size in mixed methods research should be guided by the research question, achieving a balance between small scale, data-rich designs on the one hand, and data saturation and information redundancy on the other (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007).

Within this research study, the population was defined as the total number of CAs employed in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland at the point of data collection during the 2019/2020 school year. The sample, as the sub-section of this

population which was accessible and willing to participate in the research, was devised and refined through a sampling strategy applied at the questionnaire and qualitative interview phases.

3.3.2 Sampling Strategy

Notwithstanding the issues of rigour discussed above, accessibility is a key issue for educational researchers, whereby they must make best use of whatever sample is available (Punch and Oancea, 2014). In addition to the practicalities of data collection such as time, capacity and financial resources, access to participants can have a significant influence on how researchers define their sample. This section details the range of sampling approaches that were initiated and refined as the data collection proceeded.

Once the research questions and methodological approach were defined in preparation for ethical approval, the researcher sought to engage schools to develop a sampling and recruitment strategy for CAs interested in participating in the study. As outlined in the introduction (Section 1.1.4), the researcher was able to obtain an estimate of the number of classroom assistants employed in schools across Northern Ireland through a Freedom of Information request (Appendix one) providing a population of 3519 CAs regionally.

An early probability sampling strategy proposed to undertake a large-scale survey of the classroom assistant workforce employed across the 197 post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. This strategy sought to invite participation within the initial quantitative phase across the CA population, to achieve a large, regional and representative sample. It involved direct communication with each post-primary school, through email as the most efficient strategy to contact the large number of

schools. The initial proposed method of communication with CAs was also through email contact as each member of school staff typically is provided with an institutional email account. Discussions with a staff member at C2KNI, the ICT management company for school email servers, provided useful insight into the architecture of the school email infrastructure. It was made clear that since the email addresses of classroom assistants could not be differentiated within the system from teaching and other non-teaching staff members, the approach was not ideal to communicate directly with a large number of CAs on regional basis.

A further suggestion was to use existing local authority-based email distribution networks as an alternative systems-level communication tool. The Education Authority (EA), which is the employing body for the majority of CAs, was approached as a gatekeeper to explore the feasibility of circulating research information through regional distribution networks. In the early stages of the study, a scoping interview was undertaken with a key member of EA staff who was keen to assist with the research process. When it came to the recruitment of participants, however, this member of staff had changed roles, was no longer able to assist and, consequently, this option was not approved. A further sampling strategy was to contact individual schools directly through their generic school info@ email account. A school principal was consulted on the efficacy of this approach, and it was deemed to be of limited potential.

Due to challenges accessing the CA population, it was decided to refine the scope of the sample to a non-probability purposive sample. Regionally, post-primary schools are divided into 27 Area Learning Communities (ALCs) through the Entitlement Framework (DE, 2009a). ALCs represent the voluntary geographic organisation of schools and is intended to develop the collaborative capacity of post-

primary schools, Further Education (FE) colleges and training providers to deliver an accessible and economically based curriculum for learners at Key Stage 4. This purposive sampling strategy was considered a novel and fruitful approach as each of the ALCs had a dedicated co-ordinator as well as established special interest groups. Of particular relevance, was the Special Needs Leaders or Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) groups who were considered key gatekeepers to access CA teams within their settings.

A convenience sample was devised to include 36 mainstream post-primary schools across four ALCs. The four ALCs were chosen on the basis of their representativeness of the wider post-primary sector, with the inclusion of all school types including: Controlled (CS) (predominately Protestant pupils); Catholic Maintained (CM) (predominantly Catholic pupils); Integrated (IS) (Educating together pupils of different or no religious background); Voluntary Grammar (VG); and Irish Medium (IM) schools. In addition, the sample of schools included schools from across the different sectors as well as including selective (grammar) and non-selective (secondary) as well as different genders (single-gender and mixed-gender schools)

Contact was made with the ALC co-ordinators who passed information to members of the SENCO groups in each ALC. Due to the operational pressures and SEN resourcing issues experienced by schools in Northern Ireland at the time of research, there were considerable time delays in communicating with the schools and securing their agreement to participate in the project. For example, one ALC co-ordinator expressed concern that a request for research participation was inappropriate given the stresses on school staff at the time (appendix 4).

Within the convenience sample of 36 schools contacted through the four ALC co-ordinators, twelve schools expressed an interest in participating in the study and agreed to pass information about the research to their CA teams. This resulted in an uneven spread of participating schools across the ALCs. The post-primary schools within the sample were located in a range of urban and suburban locations across a large geographic area. In order to ensure confidentiality of the participating schools, demographic information about each school and its pupil population was categorised to ensure inclusion of varying school types within the sample. For example, participating schools ranged in size from approximately 450 to 1500 pupils, categorised as small (less than 500 pupils), medium (500 to 1000 pupils) and large (more than 1000 pupils). Schools in the sample had varying numbers of pupils on the SEN register. This information was rounded up to the nearest 5%, ranging from 5% to 50%. Similarly, the proportion of pupils with a statement of SEN was also calculated, with most reporting over 2% of pupils with a statement of SEN. Finally, schools in the sample employed CA teams ranging from 6 to 60 individuals. Collectively, they employed a total of 278 CAs at the time of the data collection. Table 3.1 profiles the sample schools.

ALC	School	Size	School Type	% of Pupils with Statements	SEN Register %	No of CAs
1	School 1	Large	VG	Below	5%	24
	School 2	Medium	CS	Above 2%	35%	15
	School 3	Large	MS	Above 2%	50%	30
	School 4	Large	VG	Below	10%	6
	School 5	Medium	IS	Above 2%	25%	30
	School 6	Small	MS	Above 2%	45%	15
2	School 7	Medium	VG	Above 2%	20%	26
	School 8	Large	IS	Above 2%	25%	60
3	School 9	Medium	VG	Above 2%	15%	21
4	School 10	Medium	IM	Above 2%	25%	26
	School 11	Large	VG	Above 2%	15%	11
	School 12	Large	VG	Below	5%	14
					Total CAs	278

Table 3.1 Sample of Schools Across Four Area Learning Communities

At both phases of the data collection, the study relied on participant self-selection, with CAs making an informed choice to contribute to the data collection (Appendix 6). The researcher, as a previous CA, was mindful of the demands on this staff during pupil contact time, their limited availability during school hours to engage in non-pupil-based activities, and the potential limitations in access to ICT equipment throughout the school day. Consequently, the questionnaire and interview schedule were designed to be as convenient and accessible for CAs, with the intention that participation could take place at a time most convenient for individual CAs. An acknowledged disadvantage to this sampling approach is a potentially low response rate. A non-representative sample is also identified as a limitation for this

study (Section 7.3). Overall, the recruitment and establishment of the small purposive convenience sample of schools willing to participate was a necessary compromise within this doctoral research and the sample of CAs was refined to a more focused sample of CAs employed at post-primary level.

3.4 Quantitative Data Collection

This section of the methodology chapter outlines the rationale, design and conduct of the online questionnaire as the research instrument used in the first phase of the research and the analysis procedures adopted. It details the design, piloting, administration, and analytical approach utilised to generate a detailed profile of this workforce.

3.4.1 CA Questionnaire

A questionnaire is a written form of questioning without personal interaction (Thomas, 2017). As a prominent tool within quantitative methodology to develop descriptive statistics, the use of an online questionnaire was considered the preferred approach in an initial phase of data collection, allowing for systematic collection of data from a large number of participants with ease and minimal expense (Munn and Dever, 1995; Cohen et al, 2017). This was timely and relevant due to the relative paucity of information about the CA workforce who are not as immediately accessible as teaching staff. Questionnaire studies are considered an advantageous approach which can be accessibly administered to a large, dispersed population over a large geographic area. This method is also well suited to the time and financial constraints of doctoral study. The accessibility advantage of the questionnaire is

enhanced further by the use of online administration, with the potential to maximise returns given the immediacy of the approach.

Moreover, a questionnaire was considered the most appropriate data collection tool for the first phase of research as it fitted the purpose of the research aim and questions. Tymms (2017) highlighted a range of advantages of the use of questionnaires which are particularly relevant to this study. Firstly, they are a useful starting point at the outset of an exploratory study. As such, questionnaires as survey tools are often used to establish general patterns across a population. This is highly relevant to this study which sought to obtain an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of an under-researched group. Additionally, questionnaire tools are also used to construct demographic profiles as a starting point in classroom support research (Lee and Mawson, 1998; Lee, 2002; Carter et al., 2009; Blatchford et al., 2012) offering useful initial insights into the characteristics of the workforce, and where the descriptive analysis of the sample contextualises the survey findings.

Moreover, questionnaires are useful in facilitating an understanding of the general picture, with the advantage of being systematic and ensuring each participant answers the same questions, thereby enabling numeric quantification and comparative statistical analysis. The questionnaire tool had the benefit of guaranteeing consistency of response; every participant was posed a series of standardised questions (Cohen et al., 2017). The exploratory data required by this initial survey included: demographic information; deployment information; classroom support roles and duties; qualification and training as well as patterns of collaboration with classroom teachers. Additionally, the questionnaire provided exploratory information on less well-known aspects of workplace procedures such as induction, appraisal, and CA perspectives on their conditions of employment.

Furthermore, the tool was also desirable as it allowed for the collection of data without the need for personal interaction with participants (Morgan and Saxton, 1991). At the early stage, this is desirable as it limits any potential bias by the researcher as well as mitigating the issue of the perceived inaccessibility of the CA workforce as highlighted by the sampling strategy.

As a data collection tool, questionnaires also have a series of limitations. They require considerable investment of time in development and piloting (Munn and Dever, 1995), have limited flexibility of response (Cohen et al., 2017) and potential for bias (de Vaus, 2001), for example, in the language used to formulate the questions, and, in the representativeness of questionnaire returns to the overall population. Addressing the former, the questionnaire design included an important piloting phase which carefully assessed the accessibility of instructions for respondents as well as the wording of the questions. This was a useful exercise in adjusting the questionnaire to the varied literacy levels of CAs (Butt, 2016) as well as a checking that it was inclusive of all CA respondents. Questionnaires completed outside of direct contact with the researcher carry the risk of a wide scope of interpretation by individual participants (Tymms, 2017) which could result in ambiguous and unclear data. Methodological literature advocates the use of brief and direct questions, avoiding the use of ambiguous, difficult or jargonistic terms, and avoiding questions that are framed negatively (Munn and Dever, 1995; DeVaus, 2001; Cohen et al, 2017; Tymmes, 2017) which highlighted the importance of piloting as a key phase of questionnaire development.

Addressing these issues, questionnaires often result in low response rates, therefore the design and piloting activities focused on enhancing the attractiveness,

accessibility, and dissemination of the CA questionnaire. Additionally, agreement was sought from Principals to disseminate reminders for completion.

3.4.2 The Design of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was informed by two key activities. Firstly, the researcher was able to undertake an informal interview with a member of staff at the EA in order to understand the relevant policy context for CAs, as well as the pertinent issues in current knowledge about the work of assistants. A second aspect of questionnaire development was the literature review, specifically the theoretical insights from the Wider Pedagogical Role (WPR) model (Webster et al., 2011) which refined the focus on the questionnaire to a number of key themes: the role of assistants and their deployment, preparation for CAs and their status as paraprofessionals as the key gaps in knowledge in the regional context to be addressed within this doctoral research. The questionnaire utilised a range of question types and formats to maximise engagement with respondents.

An advantage of the pragmatic, mixed method orientation is that both quantitative and qualitative question types could be combined to provide respondents with the best possible options to respond. Open-ended and closed questions are used in combination when designing educational questionnaires (Tymms, 2017), with the use of different question types to capture a mixture of quantitative and qualitative responses. The questionnaire, therefore, used a range of question types and formats. Close ended questions were designed to be of use for eliciting information to a small number of pre-established responses. Within the questionnaire development, closed questions were considered as most appropriate when considering pre-defined responses which included items requiring frequency information and Likert scales.

Such question types are useful to capture immediate information on the experiences and perceptions of CAs that can be analysed numerically to derive descriptive statistics. Considerations in the design of closed ended questions included: conceptual clarity and inclusion of a relevant range of responses, in a format that can be answered easily. Thought was also given to the analysis requirements for the data ensuring that responses could be easily organised for robust analysis.

Open-ended questions were structured to allow CAs to provide their own individualised responses. This question type is helpful in cases where there are many possible responses or, as in this case, there is insufficient data to predict the possible response categories. In sum, such questions are useful in the initial stage of exploratory research in order to provide respondents flexibility to answer in their own context. The advantage of open-ended questions includes conceptual clarity and inclusion of a relevant range of responses, in a format that can be answered easily. Consideration was also given to the analysis requirements for the data ensuring that responses could be easily organised for analysis. However, a number of limitations are acknowledged with the use of open-ended questions. For example, the greater analytical complexity with the use of qualitative analytic methods such as thematic analysis.

Such question types are useful to capture information on the experiences and perceptions of CAs as variables to be analysed numerically and derive descriptive statistics. In addition, open-ended questions were used to provide necessary description of aspects of CAs experiences about which little is known, generating data which is rich in meaning and detail. The questionnaire was divided into seven sections, relating to the different data requirements which this phase of the research sought to address. This is detailed in figure 3.2. In total, the questionnaire presented

15 closed questions and 11 open questions. The online questionnaire is structured as follows:

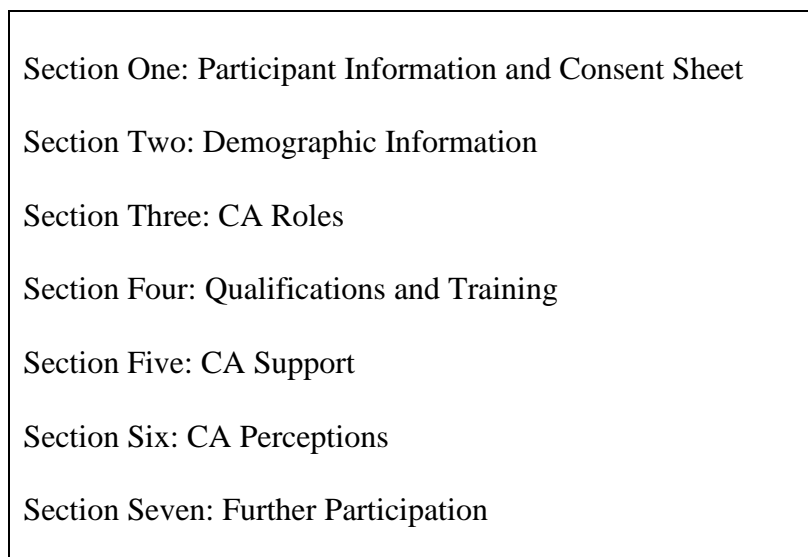


Figure 3.2 Online Questionnaire Structure

The first section presented CA with the participant information and consent form. This was followed by an initial section which sought information on respondent demographic and deployment information in order to develop a profile for CAs and their work at post-primary level within this sample. Section three gathered information of the CA role in the post-primary with a matrix question item seeking out respondent experiences of providing support to pupils across a range of domains identified in the literature. This item required respondents to signify experience providing support across a range of domains of support and in doing so suggest the frequency of such provision.

Section four sought information from respondents on their qualifications and training. Section five required information about the ways in which CAs were supported as members of school staff, including details relating to their experiences of induction and appraisal, involvement in planning and supervision. Section six

presented two Likert scale matrix questions which asked respondents to rate their agreement and levels of satisfaction across a range of items. Finally, section seven thanked participants for their contribution and asked if they were further interested in participation in the second phase of the research, and if so to provide contact information. This aided the development of a purposive volunteer sample of participants to be contacted and invited to take part in the qualitative phase.

The researcher sought to develop a questionnaire that struck a balance between the length of the questionnaire and its quality, ensuring that the former does not compromise the latter. Ary et al., (2019) link the length of a questionnaire to response rates, with a higher the response rate associated with fewer questions. It was also deemed necessary that the initial phase should not present participants with a lengthy and burdensome task and, therefore, dissuade further participation in the study (Cohen et al., 2017).

Moreover, an online questionnaire was deemed most appropriate over a postal or paper format. Online questionnaires are economical and widely accessible to large audiences (Cohen et al., 2017). The diversity and proliferation of personalised mobile devices have resulted in digital systems replacing the use of paper-based questionnaires in educational research (Tymms, 2017). Such systems facilitate rapid data collection and export the results directly into the analysis software, thus avoiding time spent on data entry. Moreover, the use of the software programme Smart Survey allowed for the online questionnaire to be developed to fit the display parameters of a wide range of technology such as computers, tablets and mobile devices, with the potential to enhance the accessibility of the data collection and meet the preferences of a large and varied workforce group with limited access to workplace devices.

On balance, however, online questionnaires have potential disadvantages, primarily the requirement of internet access as well as a degree of proficiency with ICT. This has the potential of introducing bias as the method may exclude individuals without access. Such issues are likely mitigated by the internet access provided within educational institutions as well as the provision of institutional credentials to all staff members including CAs to the C2KNI internet infrastructure, which allocates an email and a Windows account to each staff member. Another method undertaken to redress this potential bias was to offer a paper copy of the questionnaire within the participant information sheet. Furthermore, online methods hold the potential for the duplication of questionnaire completion if one individual completes the survey on multiple occasions. Moreover, a lack of methodological literature was located to assist with the development and choice of the software.

3.4.3 Piloting the Questionnaire

“Piloting increases the reliability, validity, and practicality of the questionnaire; everything about a questionnaire should be piloted”
(Oppenheim, 1992, 56).

Piloting data collection tools is a key aspect of research design which as suggested above, has potential to enhance all aspects of the instrument. The questionnaire was piloted with an alternative sample group (n=15) to test the utility, design, and effectiveness of the instrument. The pilot group was made up of number of relevant stakeholders who would not be included in the questionnaire sample. This group included: three former CAs, a SENCO, a learning mentor and a group of FE students completing a vocational CA course. This piloting group allowed for testing of the instrument by a range of CAs, while not reducing the sample. The

composite membership of this group allowed for examination of the various components of the questionnaire design including: the use of language, closed answer response choices, the sequence of the questions. This was collated into a piloting checklist used to provide comprehensive feedback and to inform the further development and implementation of the instrument (Appendix five).

The piloting group evaluated fourteen aspects of the questionnaire such as the type of questions, layout, and the length of the questionnaire as well as ease of use and portability across multiple devices. Feedback was provided on a range of items including, the sequencing of the questions, the language demands for those with dyslexia, the formatting of Likert scale items and the clarity of the instructions for a small number of questions. The piloting group also suggested an estimated completion time for the research activity. The feedback resulted in the amendment of the questionnaire and refinement in the presentation and language. Furthermore, piloting was a useful endeavour as it allowed for the testing of the questionnaire software, in advance of dissemination to schools for completion.

3.4.4 Administration of the Questionnaire

Contact was established with the sample of schools through the ALC co-ordinator with access to each school typically granted by the principal or SENCO. In one school, the SENCO preferred that the researcher contact the participants directly via institutional email. This questionnaire and participant information sheet is included in Appendix six and seven.

An invitation to participate, which included an embedded link to the online questionnaire was forwarded to CAs. The participant information sheet (appendix three) outlined the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of participation.

It detailed the focus of the research, with an overview of what participants would be asked to do in accessible and transparent language. It suggested a completion time of 25 minutes. The participant information sheet provided the assurance of anonymity and confidentiality, as well as the contact details of the researcher to address any queries.

Additionally, the information provided highlighted that a range of other accessible formats would be available on request from the researcher with the aim of ensuring that it was as accessible and inclusive as possible of any participants' needs. Consideration was given to larger display format as well as the provision of paper copies for those preferring to complete the questionnaire in non-digital format. Unfortunately, due to the scope of the research and the limitations of time and financial resources there was no provision for alternative versions in different languages.

In total, the questionnaire was sent to a representative sample of CAs (n=278) employed in twelve participating schools across four ALCs. A response rate of 28% (n=78) was achieved for the questionnaire over the period August 2019 to January 2020. It was considered crucial that the survey remained open during term time, taking into account events in the annual school calendar and the periods of high and low activity for assistants. The researchers' experience as a CA was helpful in providing contextual insight on the use of non-contact time with pupils, with the suggestion that both the start and end of term periods could be key opportunity for questionnaire completion.

Low response rate can be quite a common feature of questionnaire methodology which can limit the generalisability of the findings. Within this

workplace sample, key consideration was given to the limited non-contact time that CAs have. Several of the SENCOs advised that they advocated for CA completion of the questionnaire during staff development time. A range of measures to encourage an improved response rate included email reminders to the gatekeeper about the closing date for responses. It is acknowledged that a low response rate, creating a small sample size for this research, as a self-selected group of participants will not be representative of the wider regional CA workforce at post-primary level.

3.4.5 Data Analysis

Questionnaire responses were collated within the Smart Survey online software programme and exported for analysis, into Microsoft Office Excel programme. Figure 3.3 provides an example of the analysis of data using this software. As a flexible and accessible analysis tool, Microsoft Excel can usefully enable descriptive statistical analysis within educational research (Connolly, 2017). Responses were recorded for analysis as descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and average statistics. As part of the exploratory approach, cross tabulation of the key variables within the data set were attempted. This included cross tabulation according to school type (grammar and secondary), level of qualifications and satisfaction ratings. Open-ended questions were analysed thematically with the comments and responses coded under a common theme and collated together. Full analysis of the questionnaire findings is presented in the following chapter.

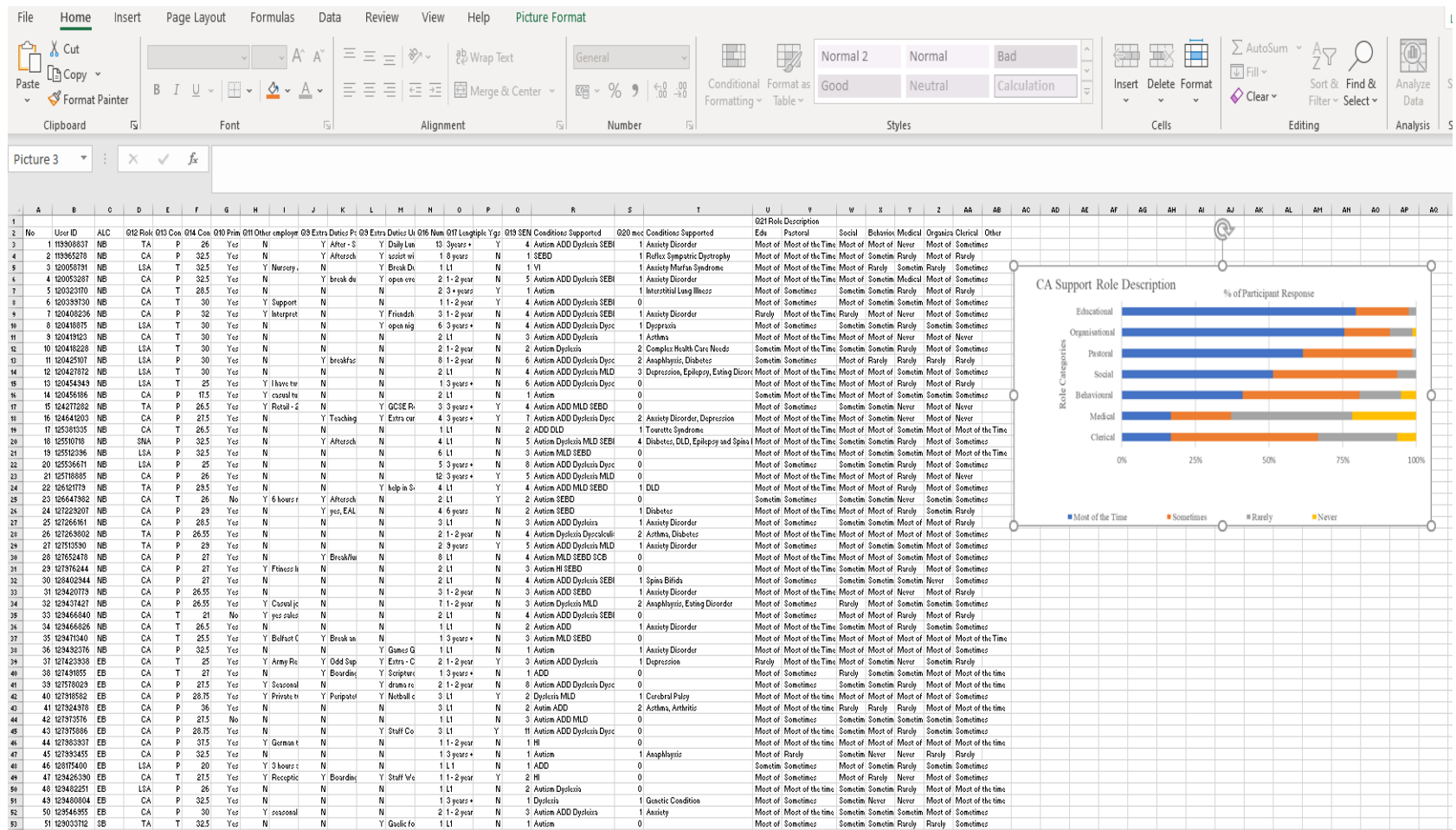


Figure 3.3 Quantitative Analysis in Microsoft Excel.

3.5. Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative research is a philosophically and methodologically diverse field encompassing a wide variety of traditions and approaches (Punch and Oancea, 2014) that aims to explore multi-modal representations of human experience. This section of the research methodology details the design, conduct and analytical approach for the second phase of the research: the use of telephone interviews. This phase of the study invited a sub-sample of participants to take part in a semi-structured telephone interview to investigate the experiences and perceptions of CAs supporting pupils with a Statement of SEN at post-primary level. This qualitative study aimed to elicit a rich descriptive account and draw out the CA voice and, in doing so, make a unique and important contribution to knowledge regionally. Within the pragmatic approach, it will document the rationale for the use of the chosen methods as well as the outcomes and compromises inherent in the doctoral research process at both phases of the research.

3.5.1 Interviews

“In order to understand other person’s constructions of reality, we would do well to ask them, in such a way that they can tell us in their terms and in a depth which addresses the rich context that is the substance of their meanings” (Jones, 1985, 46).

The interview is a dominant data collection method in qualitative research. An interview is conceived as *“a conversation between interviewer and respondent with the purpose of eliciting certain types of information from the respondent”* (Bell, 2005, 127) through which ‘both grasp for meaning together’ (Forsey, 2012, 372). The interview can be used as a means to gain insight into and explore individual or

collective perceptions and experiences of social phenomenon which prioritises meaning and context. The qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured telephone interviews with participants conducted at a time of convenience to the participant. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Interviews with participants from across school sectors allowed the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of CA perceptions of their role supporting pupils with SEN. It allowed the voice of the CA to add a further descriptive insight into the questionnaire data collected in phase one of the research. The researcher was able to focus on the holistic context of the individual experiences of CAs. One of the key advantages of this approach is to view participants as partners in knowledge generation, focusing on their voice of participants as extensions of ordinary conversations (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

3.5.1.1 Telephone Interviews

Telephone interviewing was a necessity within this study in order to ensure continuation of the research over the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic beginning in March 2020. Education Minister Peter Weir announced the closure of schools from Monday 23rd March 2020 due to the safety restrictions required to prevent the spread of the virus. At this time, schools were closed for most of the pupil population, except for provision of limited educational supervision for pupils of key workers and pupils classed as vulnerable, including those with statements of SEN. Teaching staff commenced remote learning, and support staff contributed to the school supervision of pupils over the lockdown period. It was at this time that the researcher began the qualitative phase of the study and amended the format of the interviews from in-person to telephone interviewing. At the time of data collection, the researcher sought to offer alternative forms of remote interview based on the

participants' preferences, including a recorded telephone interview, or the use of video-conferencing software such as Zoom to conduct a virtual interview. All participants expressed a preference for the former.

Telephone interviewing is an increasingly common data collection technique within the growing suite of remote and digital methods in qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2017; King et al., 2019). Acknowledged as an area with limited methodological literature, Novick (2008) points to the perception of this interview format is primarily a quantitative survey modality which appears a less attractive offer to those engaged in qualitative research. As a versatile data collection tool, yielding rich, vivid, detailed, and high-quality data, telephone interviews are also reported as a positive experience by research participants (Ward et al., 2015; King et al., 2019). Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) compared in-person interviews with telephone interviews, concluding that there is little evidence that data loss or distortion occurs, or that the interpretation or the quality of the findings is compromised. The authors conclude that this perception stems from the status of the face-to-face interview as the gold standard within qualitative research. As such, in this research telephone interviewing was considered an important modality for the collection of the qualitative phase of data collection.

There are both advantages and disadvantages associated with telephone interviewing. Advantages include decreased cost for the researcher as well as enhanced access for participants in terms of convenience and regional reach (Sweet, 2002; King et al., 2019). Furthermore, potential power differentials between interviewer and participant can be reduced using this approach (Cohen et al., 2017). As a practical data collection tool, telephone interviewing increases researcher safety and participant anonymity as it permits participant involvement within their own

environment. Moreover, telephone interviewing can decrease the potential impact of social desirability in responses as the participant is unknown to the researcher.

Conversely, disadvantages of this interview modality include the potential low-quality data derived from the telephone interaction, the absence of visual and non-verbal cues and the potential for distracted participants (Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Novick, 2008). King et al., (2019) offer a number of considerations to remedy these issues through scheduling and piloting the telephone interviews in advance in order to reduce the risk of interruption, as well as advocating for the use of hardware and software to enhance sound quality.

As a mode of interaction, Sweet (2002) suggests that it is more difficult to develop and maintain rapport with participants as well as to understand nuances in verbal communication in telephone calls due to the lack of visual engagement with the participant. Conversely, it is also reported that a lack of visual cues can enhance the experience for participants establishing a better focus on the issues of interest, develop an easy rapport and reducing the potential for response bias (Ward et al., 2015; King et al., 2019).

3.5.2 Developing the interview schedule

A semi-structured interview was selected as most appropriate for this phase of data collection. An established interview schedule was developed to ensure all the relevant topics relating to the research questions were covered and to include a variety of prompts for further discussion. A series of questions were outlined to facilitate the continuous dialogue between the researcher and the participant, yet the format and sequence of the interview were flexible to allow other emerging topics to be explained and clarified. The interview schedule therefore increased the

comprehensiveness of the data ensuring systematic data collection for each respondent (Patton, 1980).

This development of the interview schedule was informed by two preceding activities: firstly, the themes presented in the literature review were used to establish the research questions that in turn, helped to crystalise the interview questions. This was structured broadly to reflect the importance of the Wider Pedagogical Role Model (Webster et al., 2011) within the theoretical framework of this study. Secondly, findings from the quantitative survey were used to identify the key areas for further illumination, with a view to triangulating the quantitative data in relation to CA perspectives and lived experience on their classroom support role, their preparation, and their conditions of employment. In particular, the quantitative phase, identified a range of issues for further examination, for example, including role ambiguity for CAs, collaborative practice with teachers, and preparedness to provide support to pupils with SEN.

The aim of the interview was to elicit more detailed information about the experiences of assistants, relative to their CA roles, their preparation, and conditions of employment. A semi-structured interview schedule was required to allow for each participant to contribute information about their individualised experiences and perceptions, recognising the heterogeneity of this group within the education workforce. The interview schedule was composed of seven questions, which were broadly focused on a range of topics relevant to the practice and experiences of assistants, allowing for them to respond and elaborate on the findings of the previous phase. Prompts were also included with each question to support the interview process (Ary et al., 2018) and maintain focus on the board themes within the qualitative inquiry (Appendix eight).

3.5.3 Piloting the interview schedule

The interview schedule was piloted in preparation for with a group comprising a SENCO and two CAs working outside of the sample. Piloting the telephone interview and schedule were key to refining the interview schedule, testing the audio recording procedures and as a trial for data analysis. Three pilot interviews ensured technical preparation for the series of telephone interviews. Constructive feedback from the pilot group led to refining and clarifying the sequence of questions within the interview schedule as well as serving as preparation for the telephone interviewing technique. In particular, the researcher became aware of the value of taking time at the beginning of the interview to provide an introduction, developing rapport with the participant, and providing the opportunity to answer any participant questions about the research process. Similarly, throughout the series of interviews, the researcher took the time to speak to participants in advance of the interview or at the start of the interview session.

Piloting also illuminated the issue of silence in telephone interaction. Silence is often suggested as a key feature of in-person interviews as a moment for non-verbal communication or providing the impetus for further participant speech (Magnusson and Marecek, 2015). The pilot interview highlighted the suggestion that in telephone communication, silence takes on a different meaning as often signaling the end of a conversation. Therefore, the researcher decided to increase the number of prompts within the interview schedule to offset any misunderstandings. This was observed by King et al., (2019) reporting the need for overt probing to encourage participants to provide more open responses and to resolve potential ambiguities in exclusively verbal communication.

3.5.4 Conducting the interviews

The qualitative data collection was undertaken through telephone interviews with 19 participants over the period March to May 2020. Participants were recruited via the questionnaire which asked participants to signal their interest in further participation in a second qualitative phase of the research. Approximately one-third of questionnaire respondents (n=28) indicated their interest in the interview phase, providing an email address or telephone number for further contact. In March 2020, the researcher made contact with each CA through their preferred method of communication. Due to the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of schools, there was a mixed response on further participation at that time. In total, a sample of 20 CAs agreed to participate in a telephone interview, with one CA withdrawing prior to the interview.

The telephone interviews were arranged at a convenient time for participants, typically during the school day. A number highlighted that this opportunity was made possible by the closure of schools. In advance of the interviews, the researcher emailed a copy of the information sheet, reminding participants of the voluntary nature of participation, confirming participants' preference for the conduct of the interview, and checking for any accessibility requirements. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were recorded digitally. Each interview commenced with the verbal consent by participants to record the interview and to use the information provided in the qualitative analysis. After an early discovery that some of the recorded audio files could not be removed from the device, an alternative device was used, and subsequent interviews were recorded on two separate devices. Interview recordings were securely stored digitally and transcribed

in the days following the interviews. The following section will detail the analytic procedure.

3.5.5 Thematic Analysis

An analytical framework directs the researcher's gaze to particular aspects of people's words providing a structured procedure for the examination of aspects of individuals talk in qualitative research (Magnusson and Marecek, 2015). Thematic analysis, as a popular analysis choice within the qualitative paradigm, provides a framework for the interpretation of meaning within participants' accounts. Thematic analysis was chosen as the analytic framework for this stage of the research as it is a useful and flexible method for interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The rationale for this approach is based on the best fit with the research aim to investigate the experiences and perceptions of CAs employed in post-primary schools, adopting an exploratory and descriptive focus.

Moreover, this analytical method fits within the pragmatic orientation of the research, one which supports the inductive approach and does not seek to impose a particular epistemological, theoretical, or conceptual lens on the voices of participants. Thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013) is theoretically flexible, based on a method of pattern-based analysis which aims to identify and summarise the main themes and issues within the data set. Thematic analysis was defined as a distinct method in its own right by Braun and Clarke (2006) demarcating the procedure as a discrete analytical approach used widely across disciplines (Xu and Zammit, 2020).

“TA offers an accessible and robust method for those new to qualitative analysis. At a very basic level, TA is a method for developing, analysing, and

interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processes of data coding to develop themes – themes are your ultimate analytic purpose“ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, 4).

The thematic analysis followed the staged procedure established by Braun and Clarke (2006). This has been adapted and presented in Table 3.2 with an explanation of the analytical steps undertaken at each stage of the analysis.

Stage	Aim	Description of analysis
1. Transcription and Familiarisation	Produce a thorough representation of an interview. Become intimately familiar with the data, form initial impressions of the dataset.	Transcribe the recording using a transcription notation system, listen back to check for inconsistencies or errors, anonymise identifying information. Read and re-reading of transcripts and note taking
2. Coding	Identify data of interest relevant to the research questions.	Code transcripts using Nvivo – code all the data systematically and collate within a semantic label.
3. Identify Themes	Systematically identify and report on the salient features of the data set.	Systematize the patterns, establishing those most meaningful to answering the research question. Develop the analysis for individual codes to candidate themes.
4. Review Themes	Review the quality of the analysis checking for coherence and truth.	Recursive revision of candidate themes by returning to the coded dataset, check for a central organising concept and fit with the research questions and overall analysis. Construct a thematic map.
5. Define and Name Themes	Produce a refinement of themes establishing structure and relationships.	Revision of candidate themes and re-organisation of the thematic map.
6. Write up the analysis	Produce an analysis of the themes.	Drafting of the findings chapter.

Table 3.2 Thematic analysis procedure, adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013; 2020).

3.5.5.1 Transcription and Familiarisation

The first stage in the analysis procedure is the transcription of the data from an audio file to a text document in preparation for analysis. Transcription was undertaken as soon as possible after the interview, either the same or the following day, which served as a reflective tool throughout the duration of the interview stage (Magnusson and Marecek, 2015). The aim of transcription is the representation of the interview experience. Braun and Clarke (2013) caution that an interview transcription is two steps removed from the original interview experience, taking the form of a ‘selective arrangement’ and the product of the interaction between the recording and the transcriber who listens to the recording and makes choices about how to translate the spoken interaction and how best to represent what they hear. As such, the researcher adopted an orthographic style of transcription as the verbatim translation of the spoken words into a written form. All verbal utterances from speakers were transcribed in order to create as clear and thorough rendering as possible (Braun and Clarke, 2013) with the understanding that nothing should be corrected or changed.

There were some exceptions to the verbatim transcription throughout the interviews. The first instance relates to the treatment of identifying information. At times, participants provided identifying information such as their name, place of work, location or specific identifying details which could compromise anonymity. This information was initially highlighted and then subsequently changed. A second exception was the discussion of non-relevant information as participants strayed from the topic. Finally, repetitions and common colloquial phrases used in speech such as ‘mmm’ and ‘you know’ were often omitted when they were repeated more than twice. In each case, the omission of material was noted within the transcript by

the use of ellipsis (Magnusson and Marecek, 2015). Braun and Clarke (2013) note the role of interpretation in the transcription process rendering it a theoretically informed practice, necessitating the development of a transcription notation system to ensure consistency through the qualitative phase (Appendix 9).

Following transcription, the analysis focused on familiarisation or immersion in the data. The aim of this analytical stage is to become immersed or intimately familiar with the data, beginning to notice impressions and to identify possible deeper insights in the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This involves reading through the transcripts and relistening to the interview recordings, in a repeated fashion so that a set of impressions can be noted as well as conceptual ideas and issues, noting language usage or anything of interest in the data. Such initial impressions became the foundations blocks for the analysis procedure and offered initial codes. Familiarisation in the data was an active process which moved beyond simple description of the data to consider possible meaning behind the words.

3.5.5.2 Coding

Complete coding as the second stage within the analysis procedure can make use of software as a data management tool. Nvivo (version 12) was used as a robust and effective tool to support a consistent and comprehensive approach to coding the interview transcripts enabling the development of a dataset of the collective conversation of participant voices (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Figure 3.4 provides an example of Thematic analysis of the qualitative data using Nvivo software.

The aim of this phase of the analysis was to specifically identify data extracts which were relevant to the research question. At this stage, the researcher systematically worked through the data set and applied codes to the relevant data.

Part of this analysis was data reduction; reducing the extensive data captured from participants in transcripts into manageable and comprehensive proportions as '*many words of text are classified into much fewer categories*' reducing the material in different ways. (Cohen et al., 2017, 540, citing Weber, 1990). A code is utilised as a word or phrase which provides a label to capture the essence of meaning and relevance to the inquiry (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2013). Codes function as the building blocks of analysis, which can be developed by the researcher. The transcripts were imported into Nvivo, where they were read, searched, and coded systematically for chunks of data in the transcript. Exploring a series of broad research questions, the researcher coded widely and comprehensively in an inclusive and thorough manner, working through each transcript systematically to collate all instances of the same code across the dataset.

3.5.5.3 Theme Development – Identifying Themes

Braun and Clark (2013) utilise metaphor to establish the role of the researcher within theme development. Akin to the process of sculpture, the researcher utilises different tools and techniques, informed by previous experiences and actively making choices about how to shape the raw qualitative data to creatively produce an interpretation which captures the essence of participants' meaning. One such tool was the use of a reflexive journal. Braun and Clarke (2018) advocate use of a journal to support reflection, interrogation and meaning-making throughout the qualitative analysis. This was an essential practice in the recursive and generative process of theme development enabling the researcher to view research subjectivity as a resource (ibid) and to use a deliberative approach to examine creative decisions made throughout the analytic procedure. In this case, the researcher, equipped with both insider and outsider knowledge as a former CA adopting the position of an interested

outsider undergoing research training, analysed the coded dataset to create an interpretation the perceptions and experiences of a sample of CAs. An example of how this reflexive approach is included in appendix ten.

Moreover, this stage in the analytical process involved the development of codes into an organised system of themes representing patterned meaning in the accounts of CAs. Proceeding from codes to the development of candidate themes required the close examination of the coded data and its organisation into a number of themes and sub-themes of significance and relevance to the theoretical framework and the research questions. Within this analysis, the development of themes sought to describe the experiences of CAs providing support to pupils within the post-primary phase of education and the ways in which participants understood and devised meaning. Preliminary candidate themes were identified and organised within the overall structure and in relation to each other through the development of a thematic map. While an inductive approach to the coding of these was adopted through the analytic process, a few of the candidate themes became established as domain summaries (Braun and Clarke, 2019) aligned to broad components of the WPR model (Webster et al., 2011). Specifically, data relating to CA descriptions of their practice when providing support to pupils was coded as ‘CA Practice’. Moreover, the ways in which participants constructed their experience of training or of work-based learning was coded under the expansive code ‘CA Preparation’.

Finally, extracts within the transcripts which explored CA perceptions and experiences as paraprofessional non-teaching members of the school workforce were coded as ‘being a paraprofessional’ which could be associated with the ‘conditions of employment’ component of the WPR model (Webster et al., 2011). An early example of the thematic map at this stage is presented in Figure 3.5.

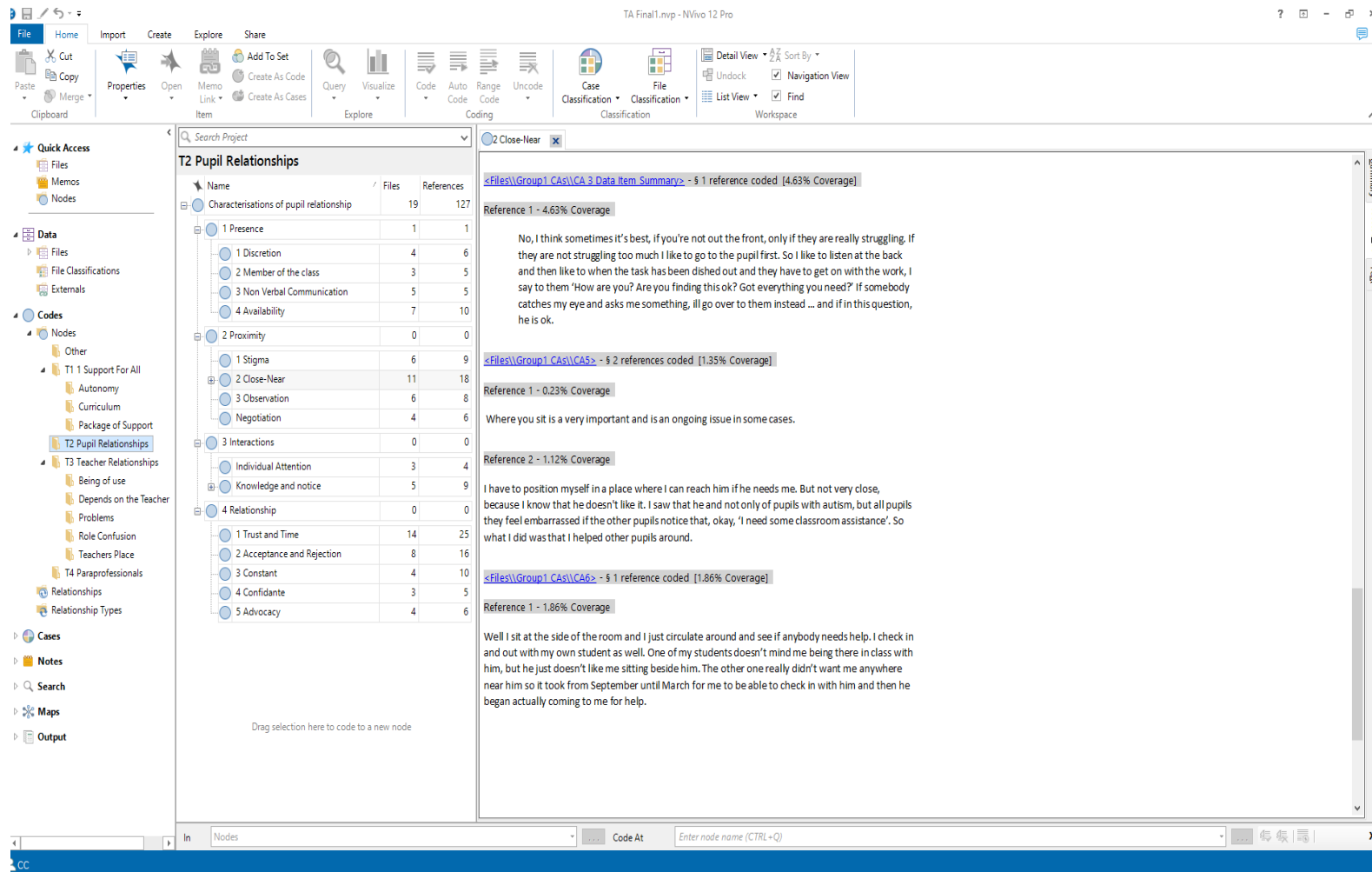


Figure 3.4 Use of Nvivo Software to aid qualitative Thematic Analysis.

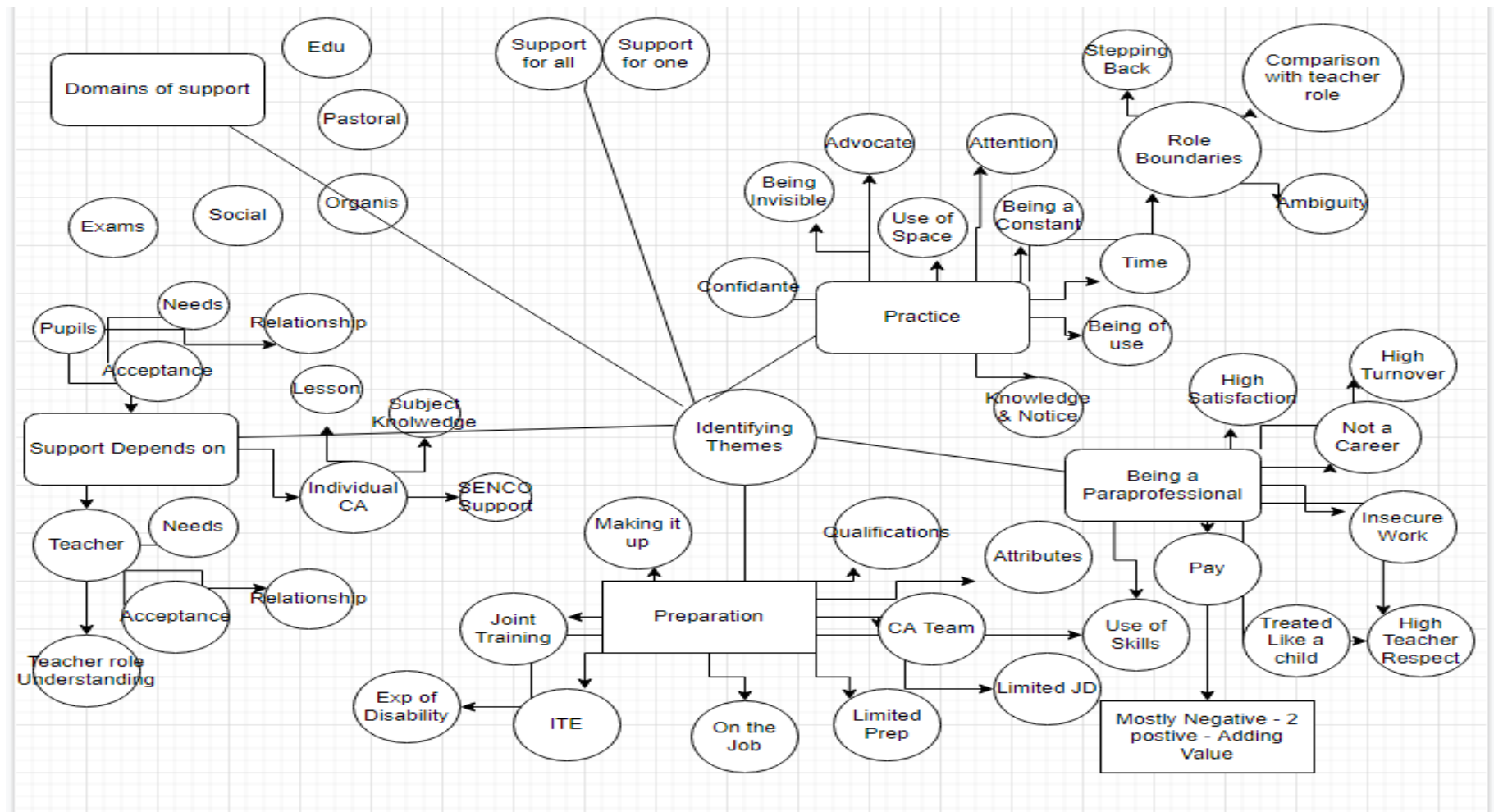


Figure 3.5 Thematic Analysis Stage 3 Identifying Themes

3.5.5.4 Theme Refinement – Reviewing, Defining and Naming Themes

In the final recursive stages of the thematic analysis the researcher works to enhance and establish the final themes. The purpose of the review phase of the analytical procedure is to progress the analysis from candidate themes to a more comprehensive and organised framework which coherently and accurately reflect the patterned meaning within the interview dataset. At this stage of the analysis, candidate themes were established as an overarching structure comprising a number of sub-themes of significance (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The proposed themes and sub-themes were refined through reading and re-reading the collated extracts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The quality of themes was considered in relation to the prevalence and fit within the data with the aim of ensuring that the themes were ‘internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive,’ in addition to providing a convincing and organised interpretation of CA perspectives and experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 97).

Furthermore, a final stage in the analytical procedure aimed to check the validity of the themes. A definition identified the focus, scope and purpose of each theme and its place within the thematic map (Braun and Clarke, 2006). At this stage, a descriptive label was devised for each theme to provide an explicative insight into themes and sub-themes which captured a concept of significance to addressing the research questions. As previously noted, at this stage of the thematic analysis some of the over-arching themes broadly corresponded with the components of the WPR Model (Webster et al., 2011) as domain summaries. The final thematic map and analysis are presented in chapter five.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This research was designed to adhere to the standards of ethical practice set by the Ulster University Research and Ethics Committee. From the outset, the research was designed with the twin aims of safeguarding the well-being, rights, and dignity of the participants, ensuring the highest standards of integrity and ethical conduct (Ulster University, 2015) and of producing high quality research with high validity and making a worthwhile contribution to collective knowledge (Hammersley & Trainanou, 2012). Ethical approval was granted on Friday 7th June 2019 (Appendix 3), and research policies and procedures were strictly adhered to at all stages of the research. Key ethical considerations of relevance to this research were respect for the individual, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity; data protection and data storage; and positionality of the researcher. These are detailed in the following sections.

3.6.1. Respect for the Individual

Designing research within a school setting, the researcher took into consideration the ethical implications of requesting access to and participation of CAs in the context of their workplace. It was essential to consider the multiple responsibilities and sensitivities of the participants to ensure no harm was caused during the research (Brooks et al., 2014) and understand what participation would mean from the perspectives of CAs as educational employees. CAs are usually allocated to pupils with Statements of SEN and, therefore, their time on school premises is tied closely to the pupils they support. As a result, the researcher believed it to be ethically appropriate to interact with CAs outside of the hours of this support, typically, in the

morning, during lunch and break time as well as after school. Furthermore, due to their conditions of employment, CAs are typically paid on an hourly basis. As a result, the researcher had to carefully consider the potential burden placed on participants if interviews were scheduled outside of their paid working hours. The researcher, therefore, carefully considered the demands on, and use of, participant time.

Workplace loyalties and power relations specific to educational workplaces were thoroughly considered prior to conducting the qualitative phases of the research. In particular, the researcher was careful to reflect on the negotiated access through a 'gatekeeper,' usually, the SENCO or senior teacher, and to understand the implications of this on the ethical approach to participation (Brooks et al., 2014). This kind of access is rarely the result of decisions made by all participants (Hammersley, 2017). Therefore, once access was granted by the Principal or the SENCO, the researcher took care to stress the voluntary basis of participation and elicited informed consent from each participant.

The data collection procedures were developed with the needs of participants in mind. An online questionnaire, that was accessible through multiple online platforms such as a computer, tablet or mobile devices was chosen. This could be completed at a time which was most suitable for the participant. Telephone interviews were undertaken at a time preferred by the participant to promote their ease of access (Brooks et al., 2014) and comfort, as well as researcher and participant safety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Benefit and harm are important considerations in educational research (BERA, 2018). Adopting a consequentialist approach requires researchers to

undertake assessments about the likelihood of various consequences for participants about their involvement in research. Harm or risk in research can take numerous forms. Firstly, it can result in damage to participants' reputations. This is particularly relevant to this study, due to the focus on the role of CAs supporting pupils with SEN. Participants may be influenced by social desirability in their responses to questionnaire and interview questions when expressing their perceptions and experiences of classroom practice. Secondly, questions asked at any stage of the study may be distressing to participants and reporting findings may have harmful consequences (Hammersley, 2017). A thorough consideration of the wording of questions in the questionnaire and interview schedules was essential to ensure such harm was prevented as far as possible.

3.6.2 Informed Consent

Informed consent is the cornerstone of ethical behaviour (Cohen et al., 2017). It is defined as the "procedure in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decisions" (Diener and Crandell, 1978, 57). Informed consent is underpinned by three underlying principles: adequate knowledge, voluntarism, and freedom of choice (Brooks et al., 2014). The participants in this research were, therefore, informed of the aims, purposes, and procedures of the study at all phases of data collection. Participants were informed of the sequential phases of the study through an information sheet (Appendix six) before obtaining participant consent. Care was taken to ensure that the participants understood and were informed of the voluntary nature of the study, their freedom to withdraw from the study at any point before the submission of the thesis without having to give a reason and the procedure to do so.

The participants were also provided with the researcher's contact information and were encouraged to seek clarification on any aspect of the study.

The researcher developed a procedure to ensure that informed consent was established for each participant at each phase of the study. The first page of the online questionnaire displayed an information sheet detailing information about the research process and the voluntary contribution expected of participants if they consented to take part. Participants were informed about the rationale and what participation would involve, confidentiality measures and their freedom to withdraw at any time and potential benefits and risks. A similar procedure was repeated in phase two. Before commencing telephone interviews, the participants were asked to give verbal consent to recording of the interview as well as being reminded that they could pause or stop the interview at any time. The researcher also ensured that the participants were informed that after the interview if they no longer wished for their contribution to be included within the analysis, they could signal this intention through email contact with the researcher.

3.6.3. Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymous treatment of participants' information and personal data are considered norms in the conduct of ethical research. Confidentiality is the act of protecting private information and researchers have a duty to protect the rights of individuals and institutions to confidentiality (BERA, 2018). In this study, private information refers to identifying information such as personal and institutional names and locations. Participants were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity measures. Complete anonymity was not possible due to the evolving and sequential nature of the study. At each phase of the study, each questionnaire return,

and interview transcript were coded with an alphanumerical code to assist with organisation and analysis. This system was consistently used across all audio and digital files.

Confidentiality was established with the participants throughout each phase of the study. The researcher ensured that participants understood that their contributions to the research would be anonymised and that steps would be taken to ensure that any identifying details such as the school, the geographic location and the name or identifying feature such as year group would be minimized as far as possible. Anonymisation and, where necessary pseudonymization, followed GDPR procedures (GDPR, 2018, Article 9(1)). Anonymity procedures were explained to participants so they felt sure that they could not be identified in the research. Interestingly, despite these efforts some participants at interview stage wished to make explicit the unique institutional arrangements of their work, specifically their perspective their job title and to differentiate their occupational role from the generic title Classroom Assistant used in the title of this research. As a result, the decision was made to include the role titles used by participants themselves. Participants are therefore identified as Classroom Assistant (CA), Learning Support Assistant (LSA), Special Needs Assistant (SNA) and Teaching Assistant (TA) within the interview data. One title was overly distinctive and so was modified to one of the above titles to ensure the anonymity of participants in this school. Walford (2006), in fact, warns that it can be those closest to research participants who can recognise them.

3.6.4 Data Protection and Data Storage

The research adhered to the six principles of The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2018) for the use and processing of participant personal data (GDPR, 2018,

Article 5). All data collected throughout the research was anonymised and stored securely on the researcher's computer. Digital files were protected by password access. Raw data such as hand-written questionnaires, audio recording and transcripts followed the appropriate data cleaning procedures once the research was completed. This involved shredding and deleting audio files after transcription.

3.6.5 Positionality of the Researcher

Mixed methods research within the pragmatic paradigm is suitable for this research as it allows for the acknowledgment of the position of the researcher. The relationship between the researcher and the researched must be made explicit and acknowledge researchers' subjectivities (Thomas, 2015). In this study, the researcher occupies the dual position as an outsider with former insider status alongside the research participants, with both experience and a range of perspectives having been formerly employed as a CA from 2014 to 2017 for a period of three academic years. Throughout the project, the researcher was positioned as an outsider to the school workforce looking in, in possession of the situated knowledge of the workplace having once undertaken the role under investigation. The researcher adopted both inside and outside perspectives (Cohen et al., 2017) as a former TA considering access to participants within school settings and as a non-practitioner in the field.

Within positivism, the researcher is conceptualised as the disinterested observer, recording data separately and objectively (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). In the conduct of quantitative data collection through the use of an online survey, the researcher adopted this approach to the collection of questionnaire data, requiring minimal involvement with the participants. Alternatively, working within the qualitative paradigm in the latter phase, the researcher also assumed the position of

an active agent in the research process. Accepting this definition, the researcher accepts a central role in both the collection of interview data and in its analysis, a dual position that affects the nature of the actions (Thomas, 2017). Methodological literature advocates the requirement of researcher reflexivity, placing importance on the researcher ‘positioning’ themselves in the research process. This is the act of the researcher making their position explicit and developing an awareness of the biases, values, and experiences that they bring to a piece of research and outlining their personal and professional motivations at the outset of a research project. Considering such motivations, previous experience was acknowledged as a check on the validity and reliability employed throughout the research process. Adopting a reflexive and pragmatic approach to this research, the researcher sought to recursively examine and acknowledge their positionality and the implications for doctoral research.

“ The insider/outsider dichotomy is, in reality, a continuum with multiple dimensions and that all researchers constantly move back and forth along several axes, depending on the time, location, participants and topic ”

(Merton, 1972, 28).

As explored by Merton (1972) the positioning of the researcher is fluid and in the case of this study, highly influenced by the programme of doctoral study. In the initial stages of the process, the researcher occupied the position of a former CA, recently employed as a CA in a secondary school and situated within the social context of school life. Reflective work at the early stages of doctoral scholarship explicitly established the motivation, rationale and research aim to pursue academic inquiry into a subject of personal, professional, and academic interest, inspired by lived experience as a CA, and to explore some of the tensions, challenges, and

experiences of this role through the developmental process of doctoral study represented a singular opportunity.

Time outside the CA role ensured a natural distance. As the doctoral training programme progressed, the researchers position shifted through intensive engagement with regional educational policy, the voluminous international research base on the work of CAs, and the research community. Exploring the multiplicity of theoretical and experiential perspectives of the work of CAs, including those of pupils, teacher and wider educational stakeholders naturally developed an informed and balanced perspective. As such, the researcher developed a critical lens through which to reflect on and evaluate previous professional experiences and which informed conceptualisation of the role of CAs within special and inclusive education examined in the literature review (chapter two) and in the research design (chapter three).

Methodologically, the researcher was clear from the outset that their position was unique. As a former Classroom Assistant undertaking research training and aiming to explore the perceptions and experiences of a paraprofessional group with the education workforce that they once belonged to. Holmes (2020) provides a considered overview of the insider-outsider continuum that researchers can experience, making explicit the advantages and disadvantages which must be reconciled by doctoral researchers in relation to the relationship with participants in the research process. Advantages of an insider position can include easier access to participant groups; priori knowledge enabling the development of more meaning and insightful questions and eliciting more valid responses; the enhanced ability to understand culturally specific verbal and non-verbal language and cues. Such advantages can contribute to the production of authentic thick description (Geertz,

1973) and enhancing understand of a particular social group (Holmes, 2020). As such the research design (section 3.2) was informed by this consideration of the researcher position as both an insider (as a former CA) and an outsider (as a university student). This position was made transparent to participants at both stages of data collection. Evidence of the effects noted were particularly evident with the qualitative study (section 5.6). Taking a balanced approach, the disadvantages of their positionality were also addressed within the research design to ensure the rigor, validity, and ethical standards of high-quality research. Key to this approach was the reflection on potential insertion of a myopic perspective and consequent researcher bias at all levels of the research design (ibid). As a former CA, it was important to ensure the maintenance of a clear boundary between the researcher's own experience and that of the participants. This became an important consideration within the qualitative stage of the research as the telephone interviews progressed and it became evident that the participants were keen to voice their subjective constructions of their CA role. Similarly, exploring CA experiences as paraprofessionals in relation to negative perceptions of pay and professional identity presented a particular challenge, promoting reflection on shared experiences. As noted, (section 3.5.5.4), the use of a research journal was used to actively reflection on assumptions and research decisions through the doctoral research as well as underscoring the responsibility to the participants to accurately interpret their perception and experiences accurately and ethically with utmost integrity.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the philosophical underpinnings, research design, and methodological approach of this doctoral research. It presented the rationale and

procedure used in this study. It has argued that the utilisation of the sequential exploratory mixed methods approach has merit as the most appropriate design to address the specific research questions. The design of this research aimed to maximise data triangulation to enhance the validity and reliability of the research findings, with an overview provided for both the quantitative and qualitative phases of inquiry. It has detailed the steps taken to ensure the development of a coherent and ethically grounded study of CAs in Northern Ireland. The following chapters present the findings of this doctoral research; chapter four sets out an analysis of the questionnaire phase. This is followed by a thematic analysis of the qualitative inquiry in chapter five.

Chapter Four: Quantitative Findings

4.0 Chapter Outline

Chapter Four presents findings from the questionnaire for Classroom Assistants (CAs) employed in a sample of twelve post-primary schools in four Area Learning Communities (ALCs) in Northern Ireland (NI) (Section 3.3.2). The aim of the questionnaire is to obtain data to create a detailed profile of the characteristics of CA support for pupils with a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in mainstream post-primary settings, specifically, information about their role, preparation, and conditions of employment.

The questionnaire was completed by a sample (n=78) of CAs using the web-based software Smart Survey. Responses were coded and imported into Microsoft Excel to enable statistical analysis, including frequency calculations and measures of central tendency to identify trends within the data set (Section 3.5.5).

The findings are structured into four sections. Section One details demographic and deployment information. Section Two identifies the range and frequency of the duties undertaken by participants. Section Three reports data relating to qualifications, training and professional development, and collaboration with teachers. Section Four details findings on conditions of employment reported by respondents. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings and outlines the areas for further illumination at the qualitative phase of the research.

4.1 Sample Demographic and Deployment Information

The online questionnaire was completed by 78 Classroom Assistants working in 12 post-primary schools, with a response rate of 28%. This sample comprised of 59 females (75.6%) and 19 males (24.4%). The majority of CAs were white (n=74; 94.9%) and representing a range of age groups across the employment life span from 18 years old to retirement at age 66. The largest proportions of participants were aged between 18 – 30 years (n=22; 28.2%) and 31 – 40 years (n=22; 28.2%). A further fifth of respondents were 41 – 50 years old (n=17; 21.8%). Fewer Classroom Assistants indicated being close to retirement age. 14 respondents (17.9%) were aged 51 – 60 years and a small proportion (n=3; 3.8%) aged 60 and over. This data is presented in Table 4.1.

Age Range	No. of Participants	% of Participants (n=78)
18 – 30	22	28.2
31 – 40	22	28.2
41 – 50	17	21.8
51 – 60	14	18.0
60+	3	3.8
Total	78	100

Table 4.1 Classroom Assistant Age Range

The length of service for CAs within this sample ranged from 2 months to 16.5 years, with the average experience at 5 years and 3 months ($SD=4$ years, 6 months). Participants indicated the school type in which they were employed, with half ($n=39$; 50.0%) employed in the Voluntary Grammar (VG) sector and half ($n=39$; 50.0%) employed in non-selective schools across other sectors, including Integrated (IS) (25.6%), Catholic Maintained (CM) (16.6%), Controlled (CS) (3.8%), and Irish Medium (IM) schools (3.8%).

Respondents were presented with an open-ended question, 'Before I was a CA, I was...' This sentence completion question sought to collect contextual information about the occupational background of Classroom Assistants participating in the study. Responses were coded thematically and are quantified in Table 4.2. The largest proportion of CAs reported coming from a mix of occupation and professional backgrounds categorised as other ($n=19$; 24.4%). Approximately a quarter of participants had previously worked in retail ($n=18$; 23.1%) or business and administration ($n=8$; 10.3%). Interestingly, a proportion of respondents reported coming from teaching backgrounds ($n=12$; 15.4%), students ($n=7$; 9.0%), other education support staff roles ($n=4$; 5.1%), and nursing ($n=3$; 3.8%).

Occupation/ Sector	No. of Participants	% of Participants (n=78)
Other	19	24.4
Retail	18	23.1
Teaching	12	15.4
Business/ Administration	11	14.1
Student	7	9.0
Other School Staff	4	5.1
Parent	4	5.1
Nurse	3	3.8
Total	78	100

Table 4.2 Classroom Assistant Occupational Background

4.2 Deployment of CAs

The questionnaire sought to capture an overview of deployment trends for Classroom Assistants at post-primary level. Deployment, as a key element of the Wider Pedagogical Model (Webster et al., 2011), is defined as the ways in which CAs are positioned or assigned to support pupils across the school system (Blatchford et al, 2009). Participants were asked to respond to questions about the logistical arrangements of their classroom deployment including the types of SEN and medical conditions they supported, the format and location of learning support in post-primary settings.

4.2.1 CA-Pupil Allocation

Respondents were asked to indicate the number of pupils with statutory Statements of SEN that they supported on a weekly basis. This data is presented in Table 4.3. Classroom Assistants indicated that they provided support for a varying number of pupils, ranging from ‘one to one’ allocation (n=26; 33.3%) to larger pupil groupings of 13 pupils. Calculations suggest CAs in this sample provided weekly support to an average of 2.7 pupils.

Furthermore, across this range, fewer participants reported helping large groups of pupils. A third of respondents (n=26; 33.3%) indicated that they were deployed to provide support for one individual pupil, with an additional third supporting two pupils (n=26; 33.3%). Approximately a fifth reported providing regular assistance for up to four pupils (n=17; 21.8%). This figure dropped to 9.0% (n=7) for Classroom Assistants supporting five to eight pupils. Two CAs (2.6%) reported supporting more than twelve pupils with statements of SEN on a regular

basis. Such data would suggest that traditional deployment patterns predominated in the schools in this sample with participants typically supporting individual pupils or small numbers of pupils.

Weekly Allocation	No. of pupils supported	No. of participants	% of Participants (n=78)
1:1	1	26	33.3
2 pupils	2	26	33.3
3 – 4 pupils	3	10	12.8
	4	7	9.0
	Total	17	21.8
5 – 8 pupils	5	2	2.6
	6	2	2.6
	7	1	1.3
	8	2	2.6
	Total	7	9.0
8 pupils or more	12	1	1.3
	13	1	1.3
	Total	2	2.6

Table 4.3 CA to Pupil Ratio

Classroom Assistants were then asked to specify the length of time they had been employed to work with the same pupil(s). These figures are presented in Table 4.4. Half of CAs (n=39; 50.0%) reported that their current allocation was less than one year. Over a quarter (n=21; 26.9%) reported supporting the same pupils for a period of one to two academic years. Only one participant (1.3%) was allocated to the same pupils over a two to three-year period. A fifth of respondents (n=17; 21.8%) reported working with the same pupils for a period of 3 years or more, with

three working with the same pupils for longer periods of time, ranging from six to nine years.

Duration of Support	No. of Participants	% of Participants (n=78)
Less than one year	39	50.0
1 – 2 years	21	26.9
2 – 3 years	1	1.3
3 years or more	14	17.9
Other (6, 8, 9 years)	3	3.8
Total	78	100

Table 4.4 Duration of CA-pupil allocation

The deployment of Classroom Assistants to individual pupils was further contextualised as CAs were asked to indicate the year group or age range in which they worked. The figures are presented in Table 4.5. Approximately three-quarters of participants (n=57; 73.1%) indicated deployment within a single year group. Over a quarter (n=19; 24.4%) reported working with pupils across year groups and key stages⁷ at post-primary education. Four respondents (5.3%) reported working with multiple year groups in the same Key Stage and eleven (14.4%) worked across multiple key stages. Over two-thirds of Classroom Assistants (n=56; 71.8%) indicated that they worked across Key Stage 3 in Year 8 (n=23; 29.5%), Year 9 (n=18; 23.1%) and Year 10 (n=15; 19.2%) Just under half supported pupils during

⁷ Year groupings within the post-primary phase of education in NI schools are organised into Key Stages starting with Key Stage 3 (Year 8, 9 and 10) for pupils aged 11 to 14, Key Stage 4 (Year 11 and 12) for pupils aged 14 to 16 studying school leaving GCSE qualifications. The final stage, known as post-16 (Year 13 and 14), for pupils over the compulsory school age of 16 years studying A levels or vocational courses.

their GCSE studies in Year 11 (n=25; 32.1%) and year 12 (n=13; 16.7%) and a smaller proportion of CAs (n=10; 12.8%) supported pupils at A level.

School Year Group	No. of Participants ⁸
Year 8	23
Year 9	18
Year 10	15
Key Stage 3	56
Year 11	25
Year 12	13
Key Stage 4	38
Year 13	8
Year 14	2
Post 16/ A Level	10

Table 4.5 CA Deployment across Year Groups

4.2.2 Format of support

The questionnaire asked participants to provide information about the most common format of support for pupils with SEN in the classroom, responses are illustrated in Figure 4.1. The majority of respondents (n=74; 94.9%) indicated they worked with pupils on an individual basis. In addition to this, over three-quarters (n=66; 84.6%) reported providing support within whole class settings, moving around the classroom throughout lessons and providing general help to all the pupils. Two-thirds (n=49; 62.8%) reported less frequent support for pupils in small in-class groups of two to five pupils. A smaller proportion of Classroom Assistants supported pupils in groups of five to ten pupils (n=44; 56.4%) and ten to fifteen pupils (n=31; 39.7%).

⁸ Total is greater than 100% as some participants identified varying deployment across year groups.

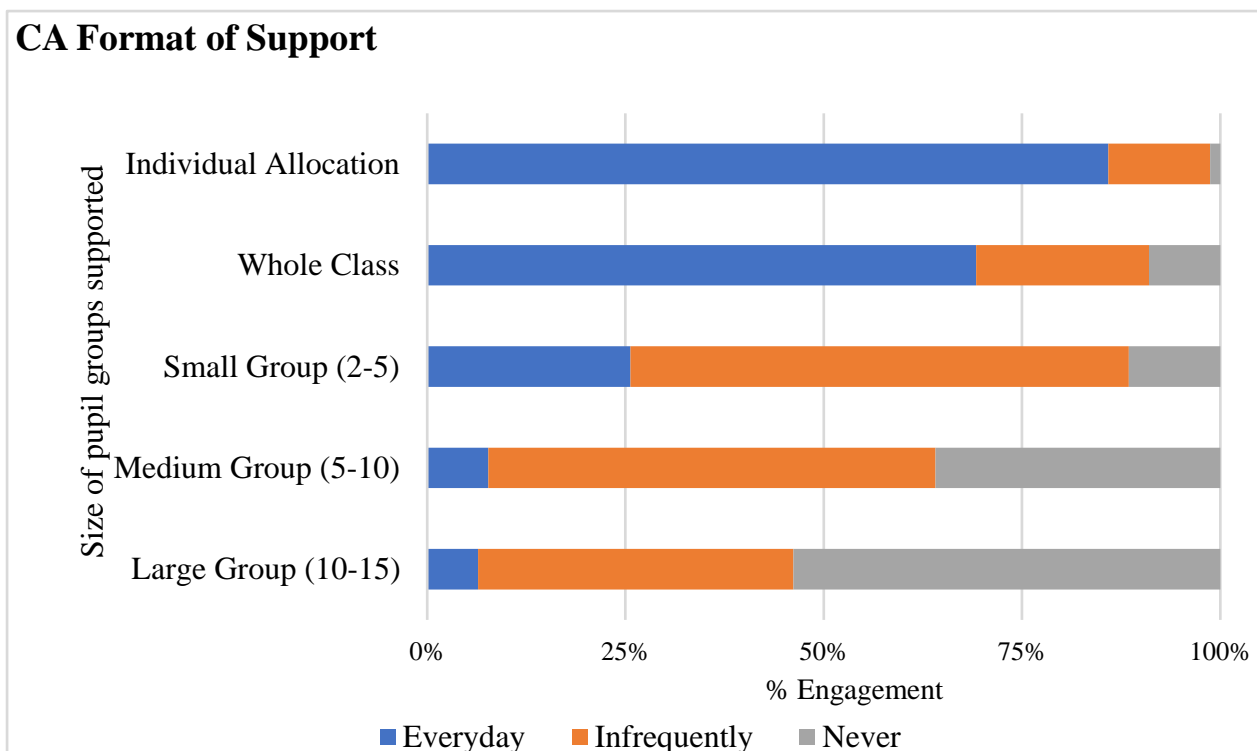


Figure 4.1 CA Format of Support

4.2.3 Location of Support

CAs were asked to provide information on the locations where they most commonly provided support for pupils. Table 4.6 illustrates that participants most frequently worked with pupils within the classroom alongside class teachers. Support was most frequently provided at the pupils' desks ($n=72$; 92.3%). A minority of respondents provided support in a separate area within the classroom ($n=15$; 19.2%), whilst a similar proportion provided support outside of the classroom in a separate room ($n=17$; 21.8%) or in a resource base or resource centre ($n=16$; 20.5%).

Location of Support	No. of Participants⁹	% of Participants (n=78)
At pupils' desks	72	92.3
In a separate location	17	21.8
In a resource base	16	20.5
Separate area in the classroom	15	19.2

Table 4.6 Location of CA support

4.2.4 Support for Special Educational Needs and Medical Conditions

Classroom Assistants were asked to identify the most common types of Special Education Needs and medical conditions stated in the statutory statement that they were deployed to support. The majority of CAs (n=64; 82.1%) reported supporting 1 – 4 SEN conditions in the classroom. This could reflect the experience of individual pupils with more than one SEN, as well as CA support for several pupils in one class. Table 4.7 present this information.

⁹ Number of Participants total is greater than 100% as CAs ⁹ as some participants identified multiple locations of support.

No. of Conditions Supported	No. of Participants	% of Participants (n=78)
1	20	25.6
2	17	21.8
3	14	17.9
4	13	16.7
5	5	6.4
6	3	3.8
7	3	3.8
8	2	2.6
11	1	1.3

Table 4.7 Number of SEN Conditions Supported

Questions in this section were designed to reflect the dual registers for Special Educational Needs and Medical Needs which came into effect in 2019 following the implementation of SENDA (2016) legislation. Over half of the participants (n=42; 53.8%) stated that in addition to supporting SEN, they also supported a range of medical conditions. These figures are presented in Tables 4.8 and 4.9. The percentage of total figure is greater than 100% as participants typically reported supporting more than one SEN for each pupil. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was identified as the most common medical condition supported (83.3%), followed by Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (51.3%), Anxiety Disorder (30.8%), Asthma (12.8%), Dyspraxia (11.5%) and Diabetes (10.3%).

The most common SEN conditions were reported as Dyslexia (50%) and Social, Emotional and Behavioural Disorder (SEBD) (37.2%) and Moderate Learning Difficulties (29.5%).

SEN Condition	No. of Participants¹⁰	% of Participants (n=78)
Dyslexia	39	50.0
Social Emotional Behavioural Disorder	29	37.2
Moderate Learning Difficulties	23	29.5
Visual Impairment	10	12.8
Hearing Impairment	10	12.8
Severe Challenging Behaviour	8	10.3
Dyscalculia	8	10.3
Severe Learning Difficulties	2	2.6
Developmental Language Delay	2	2.6
Multisensory Impairment	1	1.3
Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties	1	1.3

Table 4.8 SEN Conditions Supported

¹⁰ Number of Participants total is greater than 100% as CAs as some participants identified multiple SEN conditions supported.

Medical Conditions Supported	No. of Participants¹¹	% of Participants (n=78)
Autism Spectrum Disorder	65	83.3
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder	40	51.3
Anxiety Disorder	24	30.8
Asthma	10	12.8
Dyspraxia/ Developmental Co-ordination Difficulties	9	11.5
Diabetes	8	10.3
Other	7	9.0
Complex Healthcare Needs	7	9.0
Depression	6	7.7
Epilepsy	4	5.1
Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus	3	3.8
Developmental Delay	3	3.8
Eating Disorder	3	3.8
Cerebral Palsy	2	2.6
Acquired Brain Injury	2	1.3
Anaphylaxis	1	1.3

Table 4.9 Medical Conditions Supported

¹¹ Number of Participants total is greater than 100% as CAs as some participants identified multiple medical conditions supported.

4.3 Classroom Assistant Role

The second section of the questionnaire sought to collect CA descriptions of their role supporting pupils with SEN. Respondents were asked to describe the type of support most frequently provided to pupils within the classroom across a number of role categories based on a frequency scale of ‘most of the time’; ‘sometimes’; ‘rarely’; and ‘never’. Figure 4.2 presents these responses.

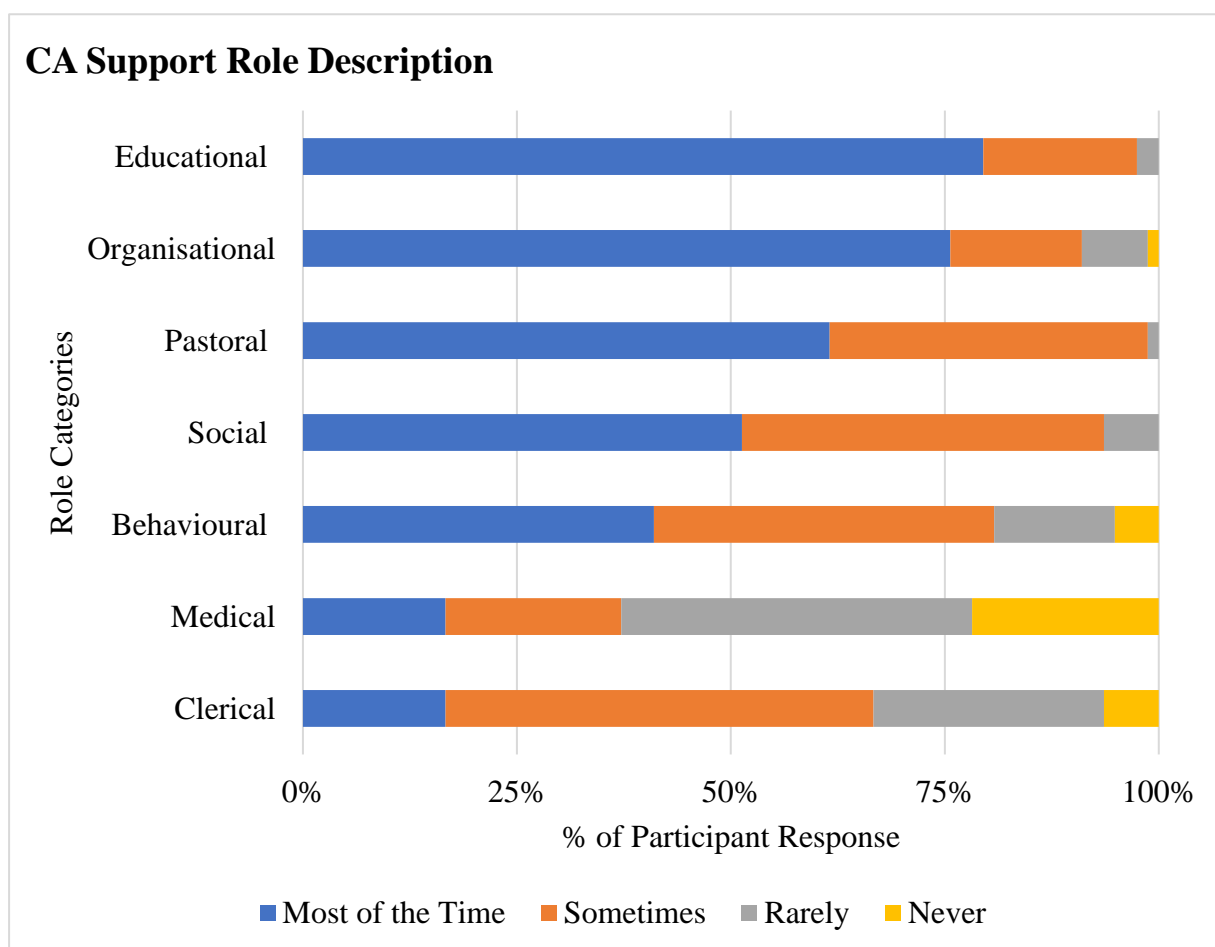


Figure 4.2 CA Support Role Description

The collated responses suggest that most of the time Classroom Assistants provided educational (n=62; 79.5%), organisational (n=59; 75.6%), pastoral (n=48; 61.5%) and social (n=40; 51.3%) support for pupils. Behavioural support was reported by roughly equal proportions of CAs as provided most of the time (n=32; 41.0%) and sometimes (n=31; 39.7%). Non-instructional support such as medical

(n=48; 61.5%) and clerical (n=60; 76.9%) were reported to be provided on a less frequent basis. Each category will be explored in further detail in the following sections.

4.3.1 Educational Support

Participants specified that they provided regular educational support to pupils, with a large proportion (n=62; 79.5%) indicating they did this most of the time. A smaller proportion of respondents (n=14; 17.9%) reported providing this type of support ‘sometimes’ or ‘rarely’ (n=2; 2.6%). Interestingly, no Classroom Assistant indicated never providing this support (Figure 4.3). CA responses indicated a high level of engagement across fourteen variables through a matrix question. The data is presented in Figure 4.3.

Participants indicated high levels of engagement across eight educational support activities on an everyday basis. These included assisting the teacher with the support and care of pupils (n=68; 87.2%), motivating pupil participation in learning activities (n=63; 80.8%), providing additional verbal instructions (n=61; 78.2%), providing individualised attention (n=60; 76.9%), prompt pupil attention and on-task behaviour (n=59; 75.6%), providing alternative explanations and examples (n=57; 73.1%) and supporting pupil completion of classwork (n=52; 66.7%). Finally, over half of the respondents (n=46; 59.0%) indicated provided additional processing time for pupils in their work daily, with 32 (41.0%) reporting doing so infrequently.

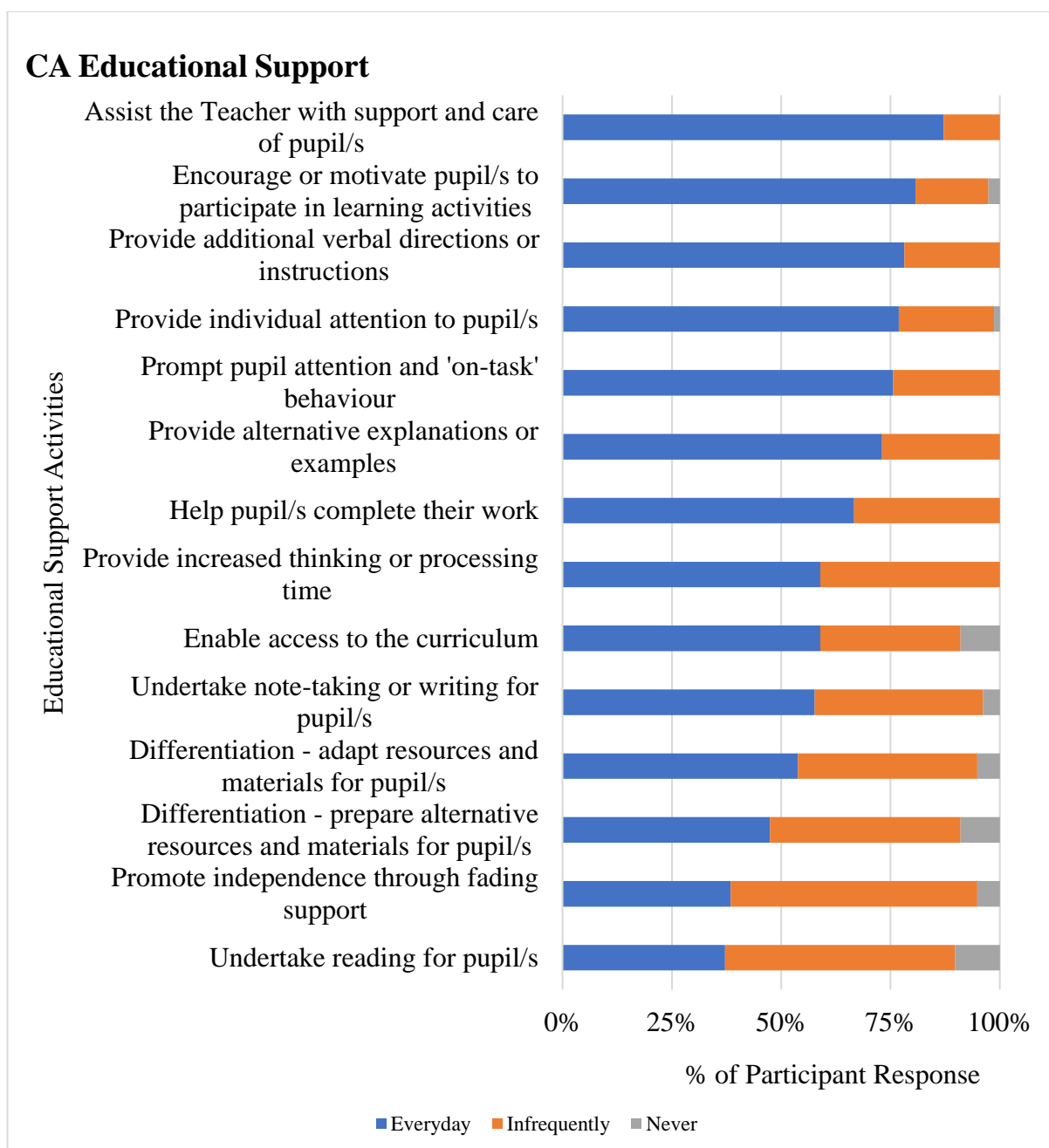


Figure 4.3 CA Educational Support

Less consensus was reported on the six variables which were reported by a higher proportion of Classroom Assistants as less frequent educational support duties relating to supporting access to the curriculum, differentiation and reading and notetaking for pupils. Over half of CAs (n=46; 59.0%) supported pupils to access to the curriculum on a daily basis, a third did so infrequently (n=25; 32.1%) and seven (9%) never supported pupils to access the curriculum. A sizable proportion of

participants (n=42; 53.8%) undertook differentiation through adaptations of pupil resources on a daily basis. Two-fifths (n=32; 41.0%) reported undertaking this task infrequently. A smaller proportion of respondents (n=37; 47.4%) indicated engaging in a further level of daily differentiation through the preparation of alternative resources and materials for pupils with SEN. A proportionate number of Classroom Assistants (n=34; 43.6%) indicated undertaking this higher level of differentiation on an infrequent basis.

A smaller, but sizable, proportion of CAs undertook notetaking or writing to pupils on a daily basis (n=45; 57.7%), over a third (n=30; 38.5%) did so infrequently. Reading for pupils reported as the least frequent type of educational support in post-primary classrooms with over a third of CAs (n=29; 37.2%) reading for pupils every day, and half of participants (n=41; 52.6%) doing so infrequently. Finally, respondents were asked about the extent to which they promoted the independence of pupils through the fading of support in learning activities. Over half (n=44; 56.4%) suggested doing so on an infrequent basis and, a third reported this on a more frequent basis (n=30; 38.5%).

4.3.2 Organisational Support

A further section of the questionnaire sought data from Classroom Assistants on the extent to which they were involved in organisational activities which facilitated the inclusion of pupils outside of timetabled support during the school day. As indicated in the overall CA support role description (Figure 4.2) three-quarters of CAs indicated providing organisational support for pupils on a daily basis (n=59; 75.6%). Engagement in discrete organisational activities was examined over two matrix

questions. This first focused on general organisational and SEN activities. This data is presented in Figure 4.4.

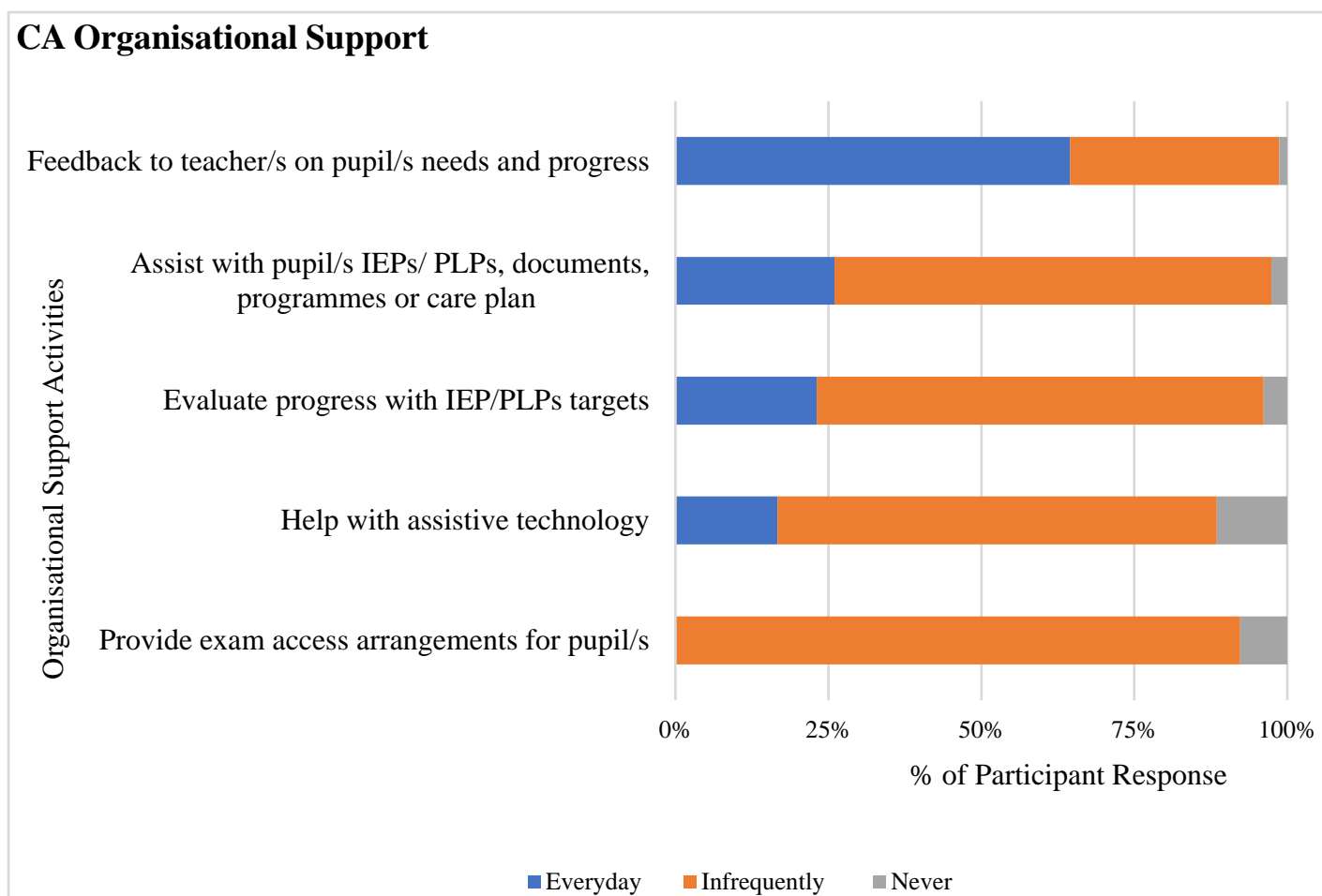


Figure 4.4 CA Organisational Support

Common activities in this domain included teacher feedback, supporting provision as outlined in the pupil IEP/ PLP and assistive technology. Approximately two-thirds ($n=51$; 65.4%) of participants reported providing feedback to teachers on pupils' needs and progress every day. Respondents reported in less frequent engagement in other aspect of organisational support for pupils with SEN. For example, approximately three-quarters ($n=56$; 71.8%) suggested infrequent use of assistive technology with pupils. Additionally, the majority of Classroom Assistants ($n=72$; 92.3%) reported providing support for exam access arrangements for pupils during exam time.

The second aspect of organisational support examined the extent of CA involvement in SEN arrangements. This focused on four key areas of SEN practice: the statement of SEN, annual review and transition plans, IEPs/PLPs, and communication with parents. This data is displayed in Table 4.10.

Involvement in SEN Activities	Yes	%	No	%
Read and understand the statement	76	97.4	2	3.8
Attend annual review meetings	72	92.3	6	7.7
Contribute to Pupil Report	61	78.2	17	21.8
Attend Parents Evenings	37	47.4	41	52.6
Contribute to post 16 Transition Plans (48 Respondents)	24	50.0	24	50.0

Table 4.10 CA involvement in SEN arrangements

CAs were asked to indicate their level of involvement in a number of school-based procedures for pupils with Statutory Statements of SEN. Almost all participants (n=76; 97.4%) reported that they had read and understood the individual pupil's Statement of Special Educational Needs, with only two (2.6%) indicating they had never done so. The Annual Review is a key process within the SEN framework, providing a continuous review of educational needs and provision (DE, 1998). The majority of respondents (n=72; 92.3%) confirmed their involvement in the annual review process. A high proportion of Classroom Assistants (n=61; 78.2%) reported making contributions to pupil reports. A further relevant feature of the SEN Framework at post-primary is transition planning, undertaken at annual review from the age of 14 years with a focus on preparation for transition to adult life (DE, 1998).

Of the 39 CAs deployed in Years 11, 12, 13 and 14, just under half (n=19; 24.4%) contributed to transition planning.

Participants were asked about their involvement with pupil Individual Education Plans (IEPs), now known as Personal Learning Plans (PLPs). A quarter reported providing support as recommended on such documents (n=20; 25.6%) on a daily basis. The majority said that this was more typically undertaken infrequently (n=55; 70.5%). Furthermore, just under a quarter of respondents (n=18; 23.1%) reported evaluating the progress of pupils against IEP or PLP targets, with approximately three-quarters of Classroom Assistants doing so infrequently (n=57; 73.1%) (Figure 4.4). Finally, less than half of the CAs (n=37; 47.4%) reported attending parents' evenings, although the majority did not (n=41; 52.6%).

4.3.3 Pastoral Support

Over half of participants (n=48; 61.5%) reported providing pastoral support in their everyday interactions with pupils (Figure 4.2). CA pastoral support activities was explored in depth, as presented in Figure 4.5. All respondents stated that part of their role was to establish a supportive relationship with the pupil(s) to whom they were allocated. The majority (n=71; 91.0%) suggested that this was a day-to-day feature of the role. Over half of Classroom Assistants (n=44; 56.4%) indicated that they provided support for pupils' emotional needs everyday, with a smaller number (n=33; 42.3%) indicating that this type of support was provided on an infrequent basis. All CAs provided support for pupil/s when upset, angry or frustrated; just over half (n=40; 51.3%) provided this every day.

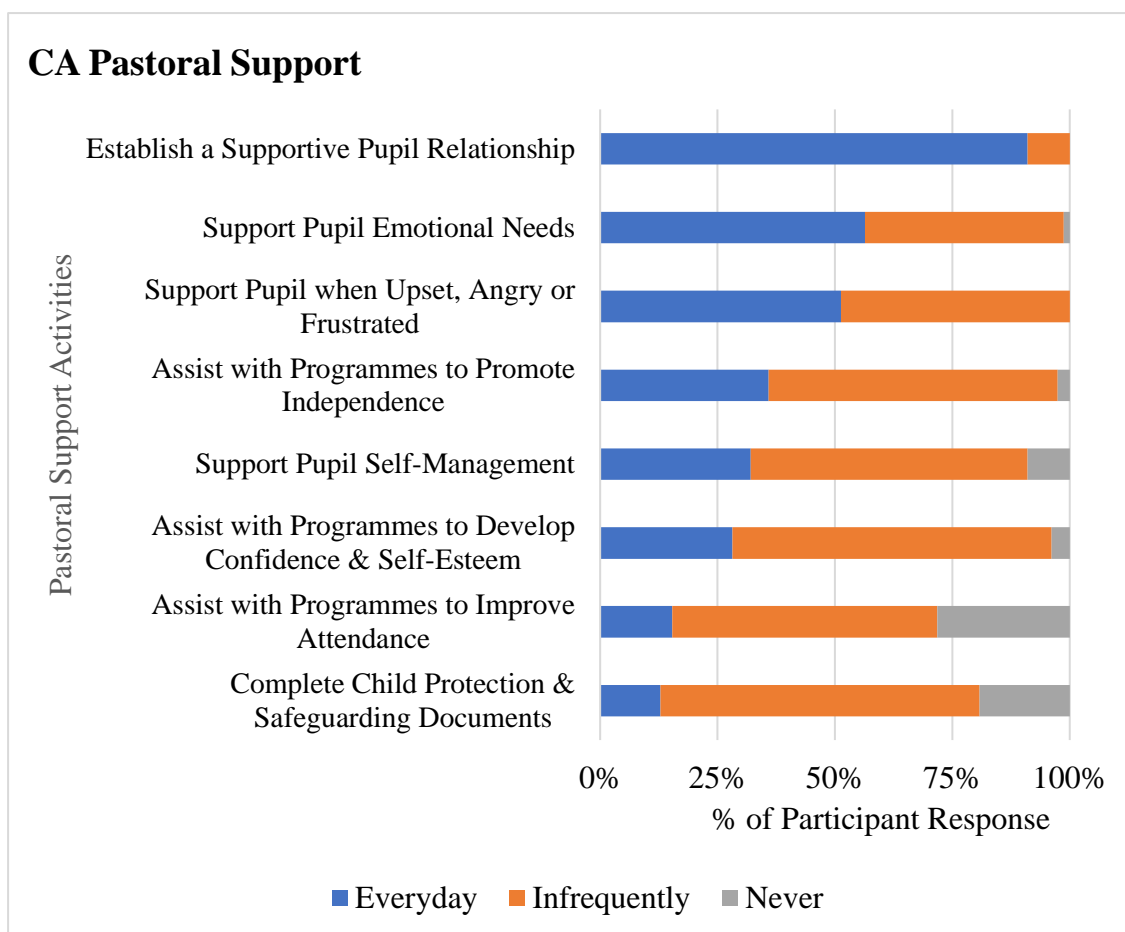


Figure 4.5 CA Pastoral Support

Other aspects of CA pastoral support were reported as provided on an infrequent basis. Participants reported completing child protection and safeguarding documents (n=63; 80.8%), assisting with programmes to develop confidence and self-esteem (n=53; 67.9%), promoting pupil independence (n=48; 61.5%), supporting pupil/s self-management (n=46; 59.0%), and supporting programmes to improve school attendance (n=44; 56.4%).

4.3.4 Social Support

This section of the questionnaire focused on CA support to facilitate the social inclusion of pupils. As noted in Figure 4.2, over three-fifths of respondents (n=48; 61.5%) indicated providing this type of support most of the time. All Classroom

Assistants indicated a high level of involvement to facilitate communication, interactions, and friendships with peers. This data is presented in Figure 4.6.

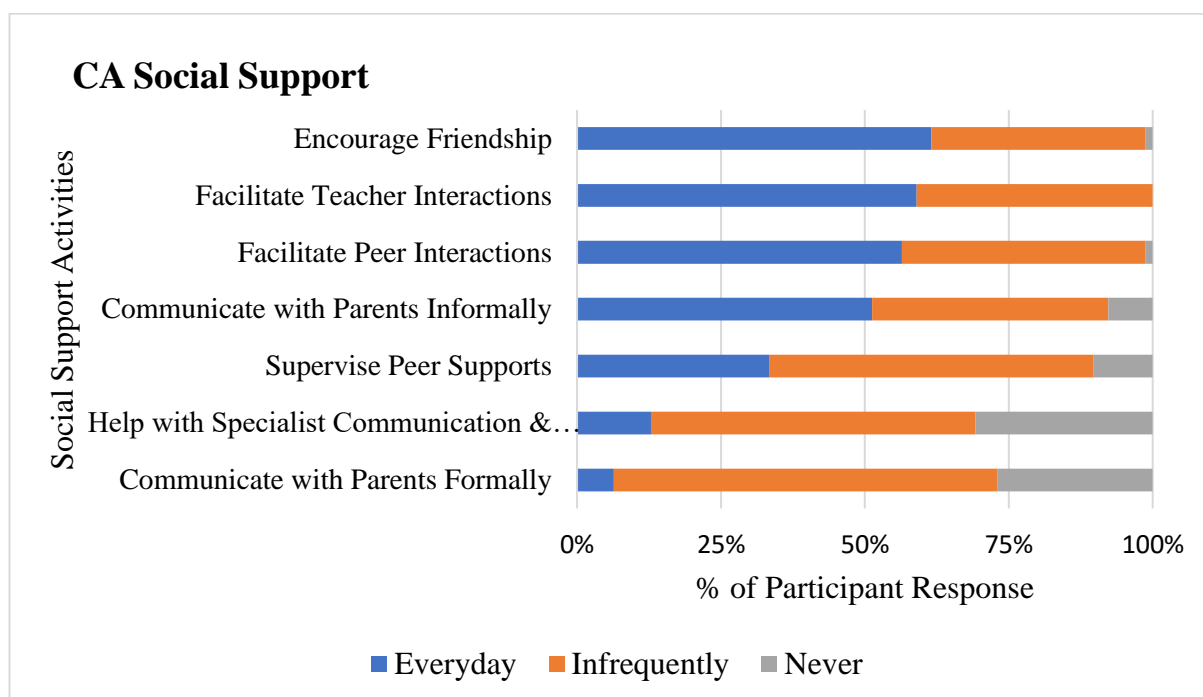


Figure 4.6 CA Social Support

Areas of everyday CA support included encouragement of pupil friendships (n=48; 61.5%), facilitate interactions with teachers (n=46; 59.0%) and peers (n=44; 56.4%), informal communication with parents (n=40; 51.3%). Participants reported less frequent engagement in formal communication with parents (n=52; 66.7%), with a quarter (n=21; 26.9%) reporting never communicating with parents or carers in this manner. Other areas of infrequent CA involvement included facilitation of peer support within the classroom (n=44; 56.4%) and helping with specialist communication skills (n=44; 56.4%).

4.4.5 Behaviour Support

Respondents indicated an emerging role in the provision of behaviour support at post-primary level. Over a third undertaking this support role ‘most of the time’ (n=32; 41.0%) or ‘sometimes’ (n=31; 39.7%) (Figure 4.2). This section, presented in Figure 4.7, was structured to reflect escalating types and levels of inappropriate and challenging behaviour.

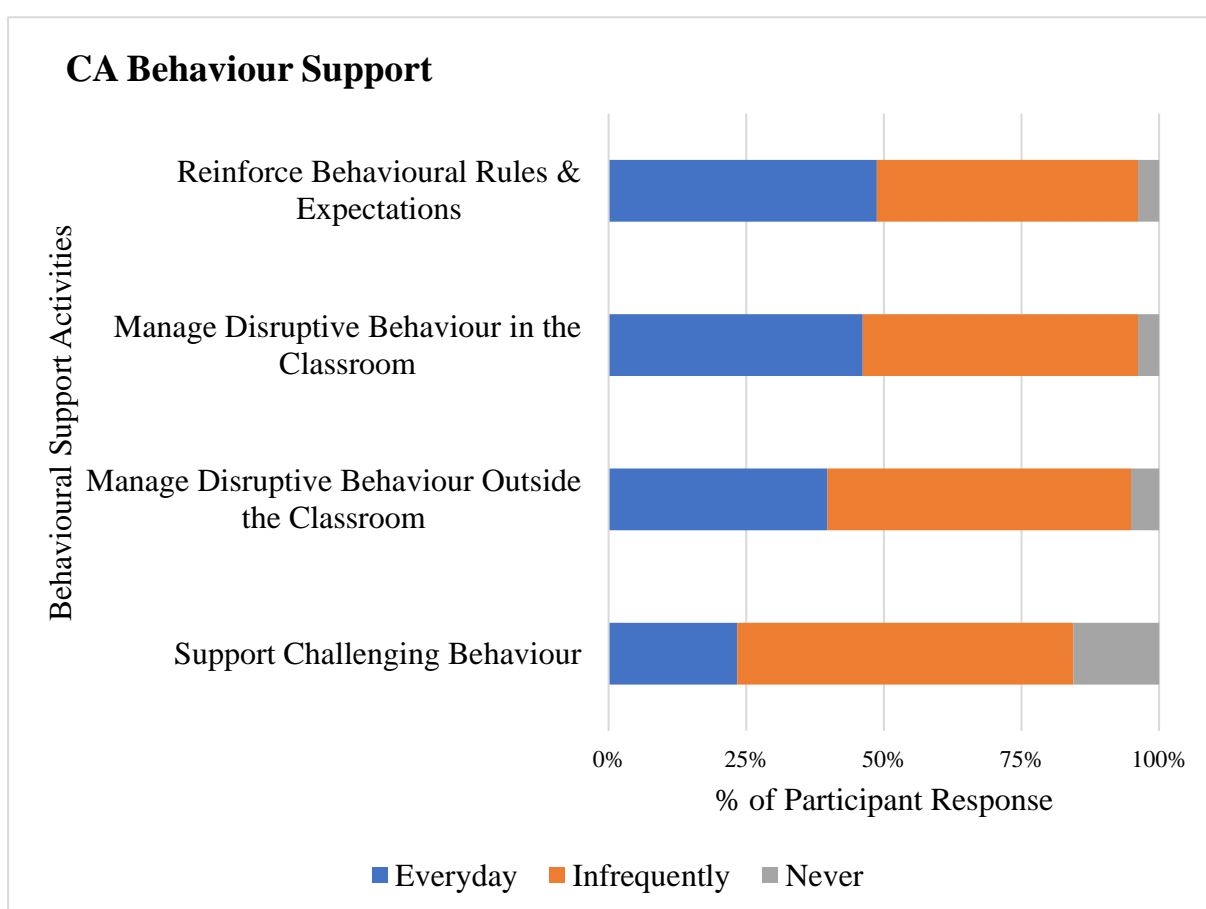


Figure 4.7 CA Behaviour Support

Just under half of Classroom Assistants (n=38; 48.7%) reported involvement in pupil interactions which reinforced behavioural rules and expectations for pupils on a daily basis. A further thirty-seven CAs (47.4%) reported promoting behavioural rules and expectations to pupils on a less frequent basis. Furthermore, the majority of

participants said that their role included managing disruptive behaviour in the classroom (n=75; 96.2%) as an everyday (n=36; 46.2%) and infrequent (n=39; 50.0%) activity. Similarly, the majority of respondents (n=74; 94.9%) reported managing disruptive behaviour outside the classroom on daily (n=31; 39.7%) and infrequent basis (n=43; 55.1%). Interestingly, the majority of assistants also (n=55; 70.5%) indicated supporting very challenging behaviour, with approximately one-fifth (n=18; 23.1%) providing such support on a daily basis.

4.4.6 Other Types of Support

Smaller proportions of Classroom Assistants reported undertaking other types of pupil support such as administrative support for teachers (n=38; 48.7%) and medical assistance for pupils (n=16; 20.5%) on a frequent basis. CAs indicated infrequently assisting with classroom administration (n=54; 69.2%), photocopying duties (n=53; 67.9%), and assisting with pupils' assessment documentation (n=53; 67.9%). The data is presented in Figure 4.8.

Figure 4.8 CA Clerical Support

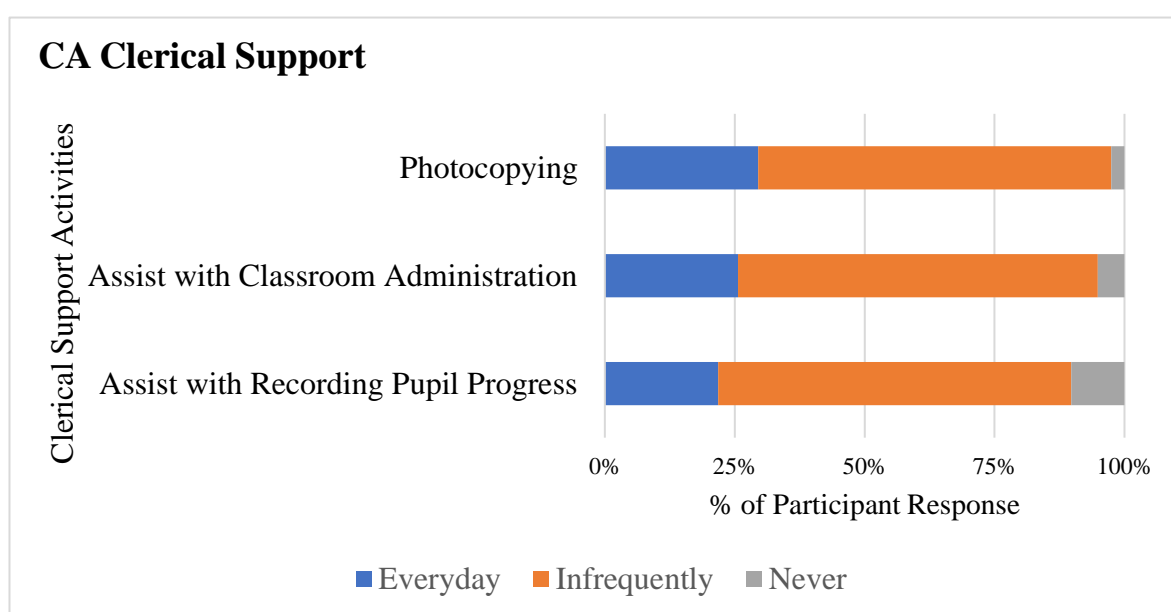


Figure 4.9 presents participants' responses to questions about the medical

support provided to pupils in mainstream classrooms. Within this domain, it is notable that a larger proportion of respondents never undertook medical duties. Almost three-quarters (n=58; 74.4%) never attended to the personal needs of pupils, administered medication to pupils (n=64; 82.1%), undertook invasive medical treatments (n=70; 89.7%), nor dealt with first aid incidents (n=43; 55.1%).

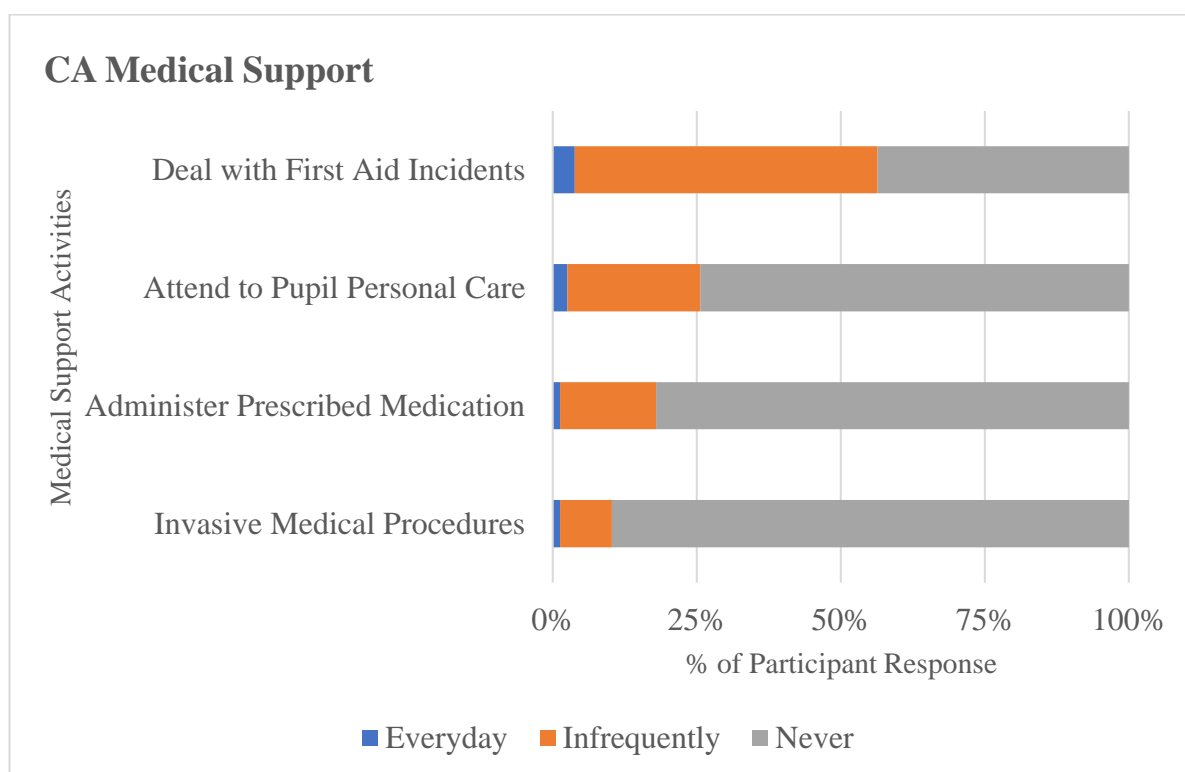


Figure 4.9 CA Medical Support

4.5 Classroom Assistant Preparation

A further aim of the questionnaire was to capture exploratory data on preparation for Classroom Assistants. Assistant roles typically require minimal qualifications, with job descriptions commonly indicating school leaving qualifications as a requirement for the post (section 1.1.3). Preparation in this context relates to a wide range of activities including pre-service qualifications as well as in-service training, professional development (CPD), and collaboration with teachers.

4.5.1 Classroom Assistant Qualifications, Training and Professional Development

The questionnaire sought to collect information about CAs' highest level of qualification, access to, and uptake of, training, and professional development. In the first instance, frequencies were calculated to indicate the highest level of qualifications held. This is illustrated in Figure 4.10.



Figure 4.10 CA Qualification Levels

Interestingly, across this sample, the majority of participants held qualifications which exceeded the role specification (Appendix two) with (n=53; 67.9%) reporting possessing qualifications from level 4 and above. Of these, over a quarter of respondents (n=22; 28.2%) had completed an undergraduate degree, approximately a fifth (n=14; 17.9%) held a postgraduate degree and twelve Classroom Assistants (15.4%) cited qualifications with qualified teacher status, for example, the Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) or a Bachelor of Education (BEd). Relevant qualifications reported in this section included undergraduate degrees such as Early Childhood Studies (n=2; 2.6%), Nursing (n=2; 2.6%), Speech and Language Therapy (n=1; 1.3%), and Disability and Childhood Studies (n=1; 1.3%). Similarly, at postgraduate level CAs in this study reported studies in SEN and Inclusion (n=5; 6.4%), Access Arrangements (n=2; 2.6%), MA in Education (n=1; 1.3%) and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) (n=1; 1.3%). Smaller numbers of participants reported achieving qualifications at level 4 (n=2; 2.6%) and level 5 (n=3; 3.8%). At the prescribed level of the CA role, approximately a fifth (n=16; 20.5%) held level 3 qualifications, and a small number (n=6; 7.7%) reported GCSE qualifications as the highest level of qualifications. Three respondents in this sample reported having no formal qualifications (n=3; 3.8%).

4.5.2 CA Training and Professional Development

Approximately a quarter of Classroom Assistants (n=19; 24.4%) reported they had completed vocational training relevant to the CA role. This most frequently took the form of a level 3 course in childcare or education. Examples included NVQ Childcare, Learning and Development (CCLD) (n=8; 10.21%), NVQ Specialist

Support for Teaching and Learning (n=4; 5.1%), Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education (CACHE) (n=2; 2.6%), NVQ Education and Training (n=2; 2.6%), OCR Teaching Learners with Dyslexia (n=2; 2.6%) and CCEA Classroom Assistant Qualification (n=1; 1.3%). Over half of CAs (n=44; 56.4%) reported completion of SEN training. The majority of participants indicated this took the form of EA or school-based training (n=35; 44.9%). A smaller proportion of respondents reported other forms of training including completion of an online course (n=4; 5.1%).¹²

Further information about Classroom Assistant professional development revealed a high level of interest, with over two-thirds of CAs (n=51; 65.4%) indicating a preference for further training. A quarter of participants (n=20; 25.6%) were unsure of their wish to undertake further training, and a small number (n=7; 9.0%) did not wish for further training. Of the respondents who reported interest in further training, approximately three-quarters (n=38; 48.7%) identified specific training needs, detailed in Table 4.11. Most common training needs were condition-specific training (n=19; 24.4%) in autism (n=11; 14.1%), ADHD (n=5; 6.4%), and dyslexia (n=4; 5.1%). Secondly, Classroom Assistants identified a range of skills-based training needs (n=19; 24.4%), including behaviour management (n=5; 6.4%), pupil mental health (n=4; 5.1%), exam access (n=4; 5.1%), and first aid training (n=4; 5.1%). Finally, ‘other’ reported training needs covered a wide range of individualized topics. Examples included: sensory processing; differentiation; promoting positive relationships; iPad training; pastoral support; sign language. A notable theme within the response was a preference for ‘any’ training, reported by eight CAs (10.3%).

¹² Responses to this question indicated that some respondents had undertaken more than one form of training.

Theme	No. of Participants	% of Participants (n=38)
Condition-specific Training	19	50.0
Autism	10	26.3
ADHD	5	13.2
Dyslexia	4	10.5
Skills based Training	19	50.0
Behaviour Management	5	13.2
Mental Health	4	10.5
Exam Access Arrangements	4	10.5
First Aid	4	10.5
Literacy/ Numeracy	2	5.3
Other	11	28.9
Any Training	8	21.1

Table 4.11 Themes in CA Training Preferences

A growing number of participants undertake work as a CA as a route to teacher education. Over half of respondents (n=42; 53.8%) had no desire to undertake initial teacher education (ITE), approximately a quarter (n=28; 35.9%) were unsure and a fifth (n=16; 20.5%) indicated their wish to undertake a teacher training. In addition, a majority of Classroom Assistants (n=67; 85.9%) responded to an open question about their professional development, providing a diverse array of suggestions on how they might wish to develop within their role. The responses were analysed thematically and presented in Table 4.12. The most prominent theme in CA responses (n=38; 48.7%) indicated a desire for further training ranging from general

comments on the need for 'further', 'more available' and 'more relevant' training to identification of specific training programmes. This was followed by participants reports of a desire to provide different types of support (n=12; 15.4%). Examples included 'different duties', supporting 'small groups', or the provision of specialist support.

Theme	Responses	Examples
Further Training	38	'Undertake further training', 'more available and relevant training', 'I would like to have more training for Dyslexia support and behaviour support'.
Provide a different type of support	12	'Different Duties', 'help more with pastoral issues, support teacher and pupil with emotional issues', 'to take small groups for educational support or provide a specialist base for SEBD or ASD students'.
Greater Knowledge	6	'Keep up to date with any changes to special needs provision in school', 'continuing whole school experience', 'more information on pastoral issues'.
Work with different pupils	5	'working with different educational needs', 'Work with Year 8', 'More experience with physical disability e.g., brain injuries'.
Other Comments	5	'Access to an iPad', 'be remunerated accordingly'.
Happy with current role	4	'Carry on with what I am doing now ', 'Already performing the role as a specialist assessor', 'I happy as I am'.
Different CA role	4	'Interested in Role as Learning Mentor', 'I feel there is the need for a more specialised "Higher Level" Teaching Assistant roles, such as those in schools in mainland GB. I would like to undertake such a role in relation to Dyslexia, in particular', 'I would like to entertain the thought of becoming a departmental support assistant'.
Be used more effectively	4	'I would like to work according to my academic level, but right now, that is not possible', 'Being used to full potential', 'Use my teaching experiences', 'to be used more efficiently for one-to-one support'.
Progression to Teaching	3	'I wish to develop professionally as a teacher', 'Maybe become a teacher', 'Secure a place on a PGCE'.
Some more pupils	2	'Maybe work my way up to supporting more children'.
Deliver Training	2	'I am also willing to provide training feedback, or undertake a training session myself', 'be allowed to feed this training back to teachers. In an ideal world teacher would be receptive of this but that is not always the case'.
Be involved in Extracurricular Activities	2	'To undertake more clubs specifically or children with special educational needs', 'After school support'.

Table 4.12 Themes in CA Role Development

4.5.3 Collaboration with Teachers

A final method of Classroom Assistant preparation examined through the questionnaire was collaborative work with teachers. This data is presented in Figure 4.11.

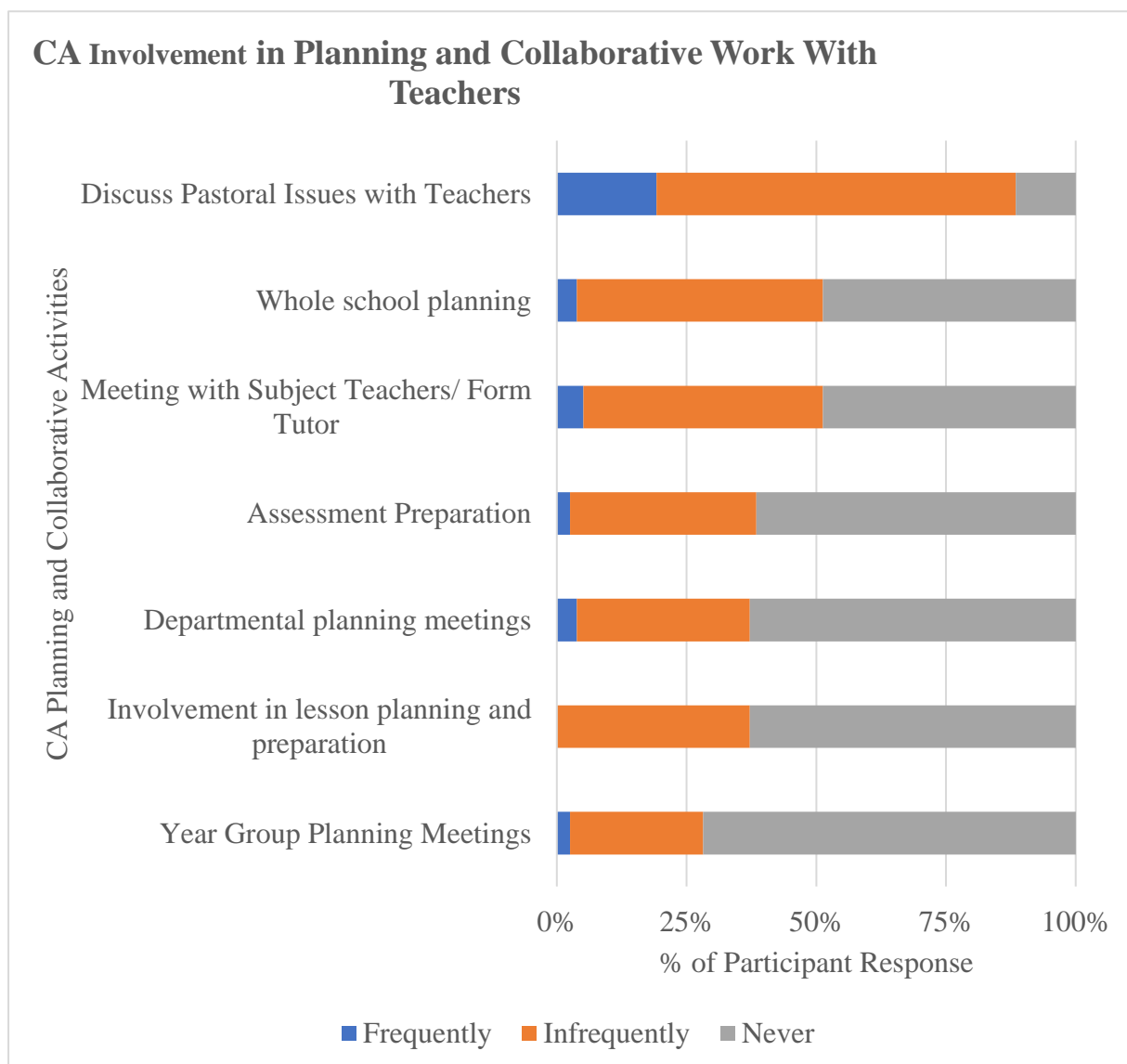


Figure 4.11 Collaborative work with Teachers

Interestingly, responses indicated one key area of collaboration. The majority of participants (n=69; 88.5%) reported discussing pastoral issues with teachers as a

key aspect of collaborative working, with over two-thirds of respondents (n=54; 69.2%) stated infrequent, or daily discussions with teachers (n=15; 19.2%). Across the remaining six items Classroom Assistants reported a low level of engagement in collaborative activities. Half of the CAs (n=39; 50.0%) stated infrequent involvement in whole school planning activities such as staff meeting and development days. Almost half (n=36; 46.2%) never participated in whole school planning. Additionally, approximately half of participants (n=37; 47.4%) infrequently met with subject teachers or form tutors. An equal proportion (n=37; 47.4%) indicated that they never met with teachers. Only four respondents (5.1%) reported regularly meeting with teaching staff. Moreover, low levels of Classroom Assistant involvement were also noted across five areas in which a sizable proportion of respondents indicated they never contributed to. These included attendance at departmental (n=49; 62.8%) or year group meeting (n=56; 71.8%), lesson planning or preparation (n=49; 62.8%) and assessment preparation (n=48; 61.5%).

4.5.4 CA Perceptions of Preparation

Finally, CAs were asked to rate their agreement with a number of statements about their level of preparedness by selecting a single item response on a five item Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. This data is presented in Table 4.13. In response to the statement ‘I have the necessary qualifications to undertake my role as a Classroom Assistant’ there was a high level of agreement among participants, with the majority (n=72; 92.3%) agreed (n=36; 46.2%) or strongly agreed (n=36; 46.2%). A small minority (n=6; 7.7%) were unsure.

Moreover, respondents also signalled a high level of agreement with the statement 'I have undertaken the necessary training to support pupils with SEN'. Over three-quarters of Classroom Assistants (n=61; 78.2%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Fourteen CAs (17.9%) were unsure and three disagreed (3.8%). Moreover, there was less consensus to the statement 'I have had opportunities to undertake training for my role as a Classroom Assistant in the last year' as over half of participants (n=45; 57.7%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had opportunities for training during the previous year. Approximately a third (n=23; 29.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement and a small proportion were unsure (n=10; 12.8%).

A further questionnaire item used a satisfaction scale to indicate respondents' perceptions of satisfaction in relating to preparation for their role using a five item Likert scale which ranged from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. The data is presented in Table 4.13. CA responses indicated mixed perceptions of satisfaction with levels of training and preparation. Firstly, Classroom Assistants expressed general satisfaction with the level of training received, with over half indicating that they were satisfied (n=46; 59.0%). In contrast, a fifth of CAs (n=17; 21.8%) indicated that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the statement. Fifteen participants (19.2%) expressed dissatisfaction with the level of training. Secondly, close to two-fifths reported a neutral view that they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their involvement in planning and preparation (n=31; 39.7%). Overall, a greater number of respondents suggested dissatisfaction (n=27; 34.6%), than satisfaction (n=20; 25.6%) with planning and preparation in their role as CA.

Question/Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have the necessary qualifications to undertake my role as a Classroom Assistant.	n=36 (46.1%)	n=36 (46.1%)	n=6 (7.7%)	n=0 (0%)	n=0 (0%)
I have undertaken the necessary training to support pupils with SEN.	n=27 (34.6%)	n=34 (43.5%)	n=14 (17.9%)	n=1 (1.2%)	n=2 (2.5%)
I have had opportunities to undertake training for my role as a Classroom Assistant in the last year.	n=16 (20.5%)	n=29 (37.1%)	n=10 (12.8%)	n=17 (21.7%)	n=6 (7.6%)
I have appropriate time during school hours for resource preparation and planning.	n=4 (5.3%)	n=20 (26.3%)	n=14 (18.4%)	n=27 (35.5%)	n=11 (14.4%)
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
In general, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the training you have received for your role as a Classroom Assistant?	n=11 (14.1%)	n=35 (44.8%)	n=17 (21.7%)	n=11 (14.1%)	n=4 (5.1%)
How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your involvement in planning and preparation for your role as a Classroom Assistant?	n=2 (2.6%)	n=18 (23.1%)	n=31 (40.8%)	n=24 (31.6%)	n=3 (3.9%)

Table 4.13 CA Perceptions of Preparation

4.6 CA Conditions of Employment

The fourth section of the questionnaire sought to capture data on CA perceptions of their roles, conditions of employment, additional duties, experiences of induction, appraisal, and supervision in the post-primary phase.

4.6.1. CA Perceptions of their roles

Classroom Assistants were asked to identify how their role was defined within their school setting. Data from the EA indicated that a wide range of titles are currently in use across schools in NI (Appendix two). Table 4.14 details the terms currently in use across the twelve participating schools. The largest proportion of CAs (n=45; 57.7%) stated that they were employed as Classroom Assistants (CAs), followed by Learning Support Assistant (LSAs) (n=16; 20.5%) and Teaching Assistant (TA) (n=16; 20.5%). One participant reported their role title as Special Needs Assistant (SNA) (1.3%).

Title	No. of Participants	% of Participants (n=78)
Classroom Assistant (CA)	45	57.7
Learning Support Assistant (LSA)	16	20.5
Teaching Assistant (TA)	16	20.5
Special Needs Assistant (SNA)	1	1.3

Table 4.14 CA Role Titles

A further element of the questionnaire asked respondents to rate their agreement with a series of statements about their role and perceptions of professional identity, selecting a single item response on a five item Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, detailed in Table 4.15. In response to the first

statement 'I am fairly paid for the work I do as a Classroom Assistant', over two-thirds of Classroom Assistants disagreed (n=31; 39.7%) or strongly disagreed (n=22; 28.2%). A smaller proportion of CAs (n=15; 19.2%) agreed with the statement and ten participants (13.2%) were unsure.

Additionally, respondents were asked about perceptions of the value of their work by pupils and teachers. Classroom Assistants indicated a high level of agreement that their role was valued by teaching staff with just under half (n=38; 48.7%) agreeing and five CAs (6.4%) strongly agreeing with the statement. Interestingly, approximately a third of participants (n=23; 29.5%) were unsure and a fifth (n=15) disagreed with the statement. Greater consensus was demonstrated to the statement 'My role is valued by pupils with Statements of Special Educational Needs' with a high level of agreement (n=64; 82.1%), within this approximately a third of respondents (n=24; 30.8%) strongly agreed with the statement. In contrast, eleven Classroom Assistants were unsure (14.1%), and one CA (1.3%) disagreed with the statement.

Moreover, participants were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement on the statement 'The boundaries between my role as a Classroom Assistant and the role of the Teacher are clear'. There was a high level of agreement with this statement; over three-quarters of respondents (n=59; 75.6%) agreed and eight Classroom Assistants (10.3%) strongly agreed. A small proportion of CAs disagreed (n=10; 12.8%), while others were unsure (n=9; 11.5%). A final item within this question asked participants to rate their general level of satisfaction with their employment as a CA across a five item Likert scale ranging from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. The majority (n=55; 70.5%) indicated a high level of job satisfaction; over half reported satisfaction (n=45; 57.7%) and a smaller proportion

as 'very satisfied' (n=11; 14.1%) with their job as a CA. Approximately a fifth of respondents (n=15; 19.2%) were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and a minority dissatisfied or very dissatisfied were with their CA role (n=6; 7.7%).

Question/Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
'I am fairly paid for the work I do as a Classroom Assistant'.	n=2 (2.6%)	n=13 (16.7%)	n=10 (12.8%)	n=31 (39.7%)	n=22 (28.2%)
'My role as a Classroom Assistant is valued by Teaching Staff'.	n=5 (6.4%)	n=33 (42.3%)	n=23 (29.5%)	n=14 (17.9%)	n=3 (3.8%)
'My role is valued by pupils with Statements of Special Educational Needs'.	n=24 (30.8%)	n=42 (53.8%)	n=11 (14.1%)	n=1 (1.3%)	n=0 (0.0%)
'The boundaries between my role as a Classroom Assistant and the role of the Teacher are clear'.	n=8 (10.3%)	n=51 (65.4%)	n=9 (11.5%)	n=9 (11.5%)	n=1 (1.3%)
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
In general, how satisfied or dissatisfied with your job as a Classroom Assistant?	n=11 (14.1%)	n=45 (57.7%)	n=16 (20.5%)	n=5 (6.4%)	n=1 (1.3%)

Table 4.15 Perceptions of the CA Support Role

4.6.2 Contracts of Employment and Additional Employment

Over half of Classroom Assistants (n=48; 61.5%) reported their employment was on a permanent basis whilst a smaller number (n=30; 38.5%) were on temporary contracts. One CA reported having no contract, suggesting a casual arrangement for their employment ‘only as long as the child remains in school’. The hours of employment for CAs ranged from 10.5 hours to 36 hours per week, with the average working week estimated at 29 hours. The majority (n=75; 96.2%) reported that the CA post was their primary form of employment. However, just over a third of participants (n=30; 38.5%) undertook secondary employment; a fifth of these (n=17; 21.8%) reported working additional hours, ranging from three to thirty hours per week, with an average of 9.7 hours per week. A small number of respondents undertook casual (n=4; 5.1%) and seasonal work in the summer months (n=5; 6.4%). Responses were coded thematically and are presented in Table 4.16.

Occupation/ Sector	No. of Participants	% of Participants (n=30)
Tutoring/Teaching	7	9.0
Seasonal Summer Employment	5	6.4
Retail	4	5.1
Heritage/Hospitality	4	5.1
Childcare/Youth Work	3	3.8
Sports/Fitness	3	3.8
Administration	2	2.6
Other	2	2.6

Table 4.16 CA Secondary Employment

4.6.3 Additional Duties

A series of questionnaire items sought information about the nature of any additional CA duties undertaken beyond immediate classroom support. A quarter of Classroom Assistants (n=20; 25.6%) reported a range of paid duties outside their remit, these included supervision of Extended Schools Programmes (Breakfast and After Schools clubs) (n=8; 10.3%), general supervision (n=6; 7.7%), teaching additional subjects such as music, Polish or learning support (n=5; 6.4%) and sports coaching (n=1; 1.3%). In some cases, more than one additional duty was reported by participants. This data is presented in Table 4.17.

Duties	No. of Participants	% of Participants (n=24)	Examples
Extended Schools Breakfast/ Afterschool clubs	8	33.3%	Breakfast supervisor 'Running two clubs afterschool that are part of my contracted hours art and film club'.
General Supervision	6	25.0%	'Break and Lunch Duty'.
Extra-Curricular Clubs	6	25.0%	'Homework Club, Quiz Club and Cookery Club Supervisor'. 'Basketball coaching, homework club mentor'.
Music Lessons	2	8.3%	'Teaching music', 'Afterschool piano lessons'.
Other	4	16.7%	'EAL teacher, GCSE Language teacher', 'Peripatetic Learning Support Teacher', 'Residential Tutor', 'Careers Assistant'.

Table 4.17 Additional Duties

One-third of CAs (n=26; 33.3%) also undertook similar duties on a voluntary unpaid basis, with a small number of participants reporting more than one duty. This

data is presented in Table 4.18. Unpaid involvement was noted in extra-curricular activities (n=15; 57.7%), school events (n=6; 23.1%), break, lunch and after school supervision (n=5; 19.2%), and interventions (ASD social, behaviour management) (n=3; 11.5%). Seven participants (9.0%) indicated they undertook both paid and unpaid additional activities.

Duties	No. of Participants	% of Participants (n=26)	Examples
Extra-Curricular Clubs	15	57.7%	'Drama Group', 'Games Group', 'Extra-curricular Group', 'music groups', 'GCSE Revision Classes', 'Scripture Union lunchtime club', 'Extra - Curricular - Music' 'Teacher ICT Afterschool', 'squash', 'Netball coach', 'Cross Country Club', 'homework club and various sports including Gaelic football', 'Juvenile Coach in GAA', 'football coaching', 'Gaelic football and Camogie Coach', 'Extra-curriculars', 'Badminton Club'
Supporting Subject Departments	6	23.1%	'open evening', 'drama productions', 'school play' Assisting on trips'
General Supervision	5	19.2%	'Break Duties', 'supervising morning', Lunch duties.
Interventions	3	11.5%	'Friendship group for pupils with anxiety', 'Friendship Club which entails supervision of children on SEN register over an unpaid lunch' 'Behaviour management programme'.

Table 4.18 Additional Unpaid Duties

4.6.4 Induction and Appraisal

Three-quarters of respondents (n=59; 75.6%) indicated that they had received induction when commencing their employment, while almost a quarter (n=19; 24.4%) had not. In response to this open question, respondents provided details of their induction; Table 4.19 presents their responses set out thematically. The most common themes within CA induction included a meeting with the SENCO or the wider CA team (n=26; 49.0%), school-based training (n=26; 49.0%), typically provided at the beginning of the school year, and CA shadowing (n=23; 29.5%).

Theme	No. of Responses	Examples
SENCO/ Team meeting	26	'Brief induction meeting – 20 minutes', 'Whole school induction which introduced new teachers and TAs', 'Presentations by the SENCO and specialist teacher and Year 8 TA meeting'.
Training	26	'1-week training', 'Various training provided by the school for one week prior to students returning to the school', 'child protection training, whole staff involved'.
CA Shadowing	23	'Was placed with a 'buddy' (Classroom Assistant) to shadow', 'I shadowed experienced staff'.
Familiarisation with pupil Documents	16	'Read the Statement', 'I was able to read my pupils file and was talked through it', 'I was given pupil statements to read- 2 hours'.
Use of Resources	9	'Handbook for TLA duties', 'I was provided with the school guidelines for classroom assistants', 'Police Checks'.
Tour of the School	9	'Tour of the school by another CA', 'A period where you came in and got to familiarise yourself with your surroundings'.
Introduction to pupils	9	'Formal introduction to pupil', 'I was just introduced by SENCO in charge to a student for few minutes'.
Peer Support	4	'Introduced to the other classroom assistants', 'Other CAs offered support as needed'.
Negative Statements	4	'I did not go through an induction process, not much help provided', 'I did not receive any training or induction'.
Other	3	'Given timetables reviews weekly', 'I was given a settling in period and then brought in for an update to raise any concerns', 'Meet the pupil's parents'.

Table 4.19 Themes in CA Induction

Classroom Assistants were also asked about school procedures for appraisal or evaluation of their role. Responding to the question, 'Have you had an appraisal or

evaluation of your work as a Classroom Assistant in the last 12 months?', less than a quarter (n=19; 24.4%) had received this, whilst over half (n=46; 59.0%) had not and twelve CAs (15.4%) were unsure. A small number of participants (n=18; 23.1%) described their experiences of appraisal, indicating most commonly a formal meeting or discussion with the SENCO (n=9), a member of staff from the EA (n=2) or a specialist teacher (n=2). Three respondents reported more informal arrangements.

For Classroom Assistants who had been involved in an appraisal exercise, a small number indicated the focus of the appraisal as receiving feedback (n=4), discussing concerns and issues (n=4), evaluating pupil progress and wellbeing (n=2), or reporting the outcome of an intervention (n=1). One CA indicated that their appraisal resulted in a change in their deployment. Table 4.20 presents a thematic summary of participants comments describing appraisal activities.

Theme	No. of Responses	Examples
SENCO	9	'Spoke to SENCO', 'SENCO meeting', 'SENCO and HR meeting'.
Focus of the appraisal	6	'Discuss feedback and aspirations', 'Feedback from home or the pupil themselves, from teachers', 'We can always make suggestions on how to improve or adapt the level of support for our student or class, 'Chat about any concerns', 'any issues with performance are discussed and any issues I may be facing are brought up', 'my performance and how to improve', 'Pupil progress in certain subjects and wellbeing, 'concerns from home and class teachers', 'discussion of CA issues'.
Other Staff	4	'Meeting with line manager', 'appraisal with HR', 'Discussion with line-manager'.
Evaluation	2	'Form filled in', 'complete an appraisal form'.
Other	2	'SENCO in charge came to class to supervise for a while my interaction with the students'. 'Education Authority staff came to evaluate my work with a severe ASD student', 'At end of first year role reassessed to split duties between years 9 and 10'.

Table 4.20 Themes in CA Appraisal

4.6.5 Supervision and Teacher Directions

This section of the questionnaire aimed to collect data from respondents about the frequency of their supervision arrangements with Teachers and SENCOs. Responses are illustrated in Figure 4.12 and detailed in Table 4.21.

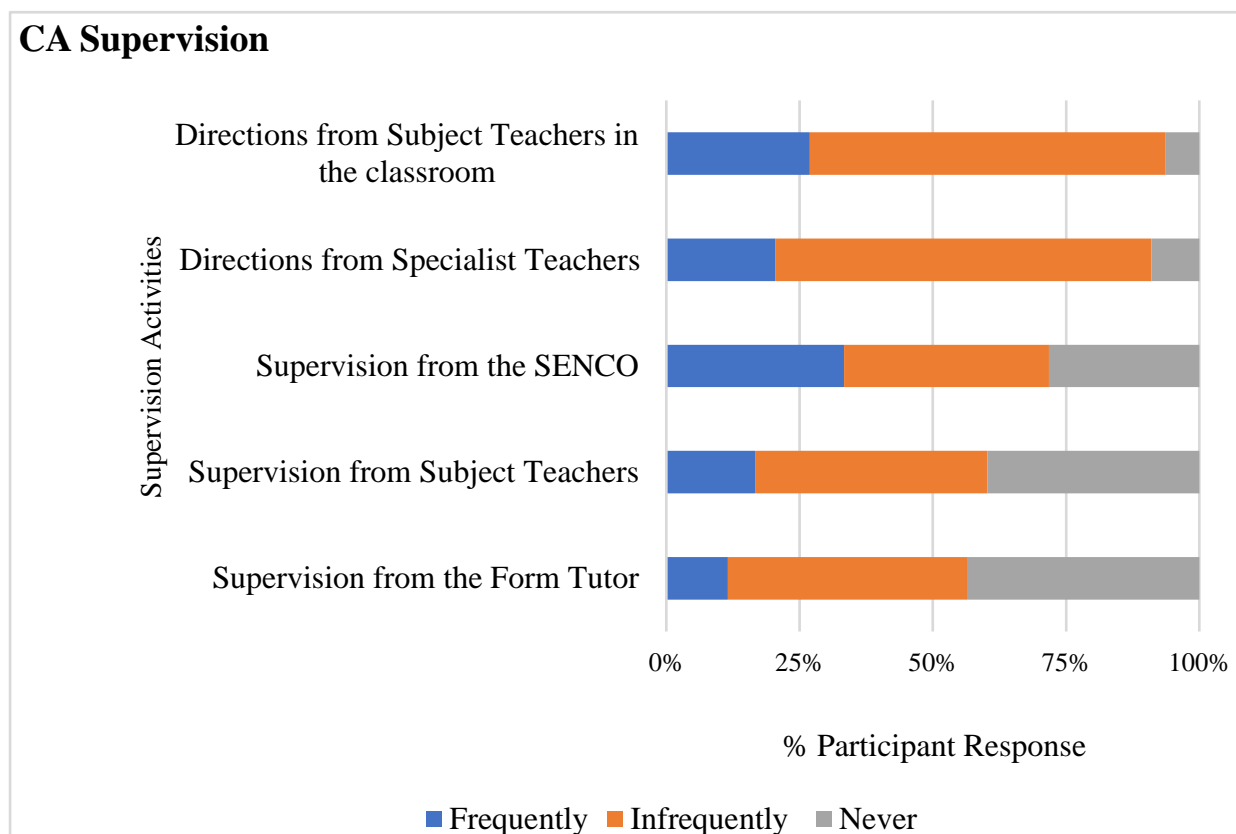


Figure 4.12 CA Supervision

Two-thirds of Classroom Assistants (n=52; 66.7%) indicated that they infrequently received directions from Subject Teachers in the classroom. A quarter (n=21; 26.9%) reported receiving daily direction and a further five (6.4%) indicated never receiving subject teacher directions. CAs were then asked to state how often they received directions from specialist teachers in support for pupils with SEN. Following a similar trend, the largest proportion (n=55; 70.5%) received infrequent directions, with smaller numbers of participants receiving specialist direction on an

everyday basis (n=16; 20.5%) or not at all (n=7; 9.0%). Respondents were also asked to indicate the frequency of supervision from member of teaching staff. Supervision was most commonly provided by the SENCO, with a third of Classroom Assistants (n=26; 33.3%) receiving daily supervision, a slightly higher proportion (n=30; 38.5%) receiving infrequent supervision and a smaller number (n=22; 28.2%) receiving no supervision from the SENCO.

The second most frequent form of supervision came from the Form Tutor. Nine CAs (11.5%) received this on a regular basis, two-fifths (n=35; 44.9%) received form teacher supervision on a less frequent basis, with approximately the same proportion of participants (n=34; 43.6%) reporting never receiving Form Tutor supervision. Interestingly, respondents were least likely to receive supervision from subject teachers; a minority of Classroom Assistants (n=13; 16.7%) reported received this on a daily basis, two-fifths (n=34; 43.6%) received occasional supervision and over a third (n=31; 39.7%) received none.

A further question sought to elicit CA perceptions on teacher direction and supervision arrangements. The first questionnaire item asked participants to express their level of agreement with the statement 'I receive appropriate supervision and support from the SENCO'. There was a high level of agreement (n=64; 82.1%) about the appropriate level of SENCO supervision with over half of respondents (n=41; 52.6%) agreeing and just under a third strongly agreeing (n=23; 29.5%) with the statement. A few disagreed (n=9; 11.5%) or were unsure (n=5; 6.4%). A second statement 'I receive appropriate supervision and support from class teachers' found general agreement as approximately two-thirds of Classroom Assistants (n=50; 64.1%) agreed with the statement. Over a fifth of CAs (n=18; 23.1%) indicated uncertainty and a smaller proportion disagree (n=15; 19.2%) with the statement.

The final item asked respondents to indicate their satisfaction with the general supervision and support they receive in their role as CA. This was structured as a five item Likert scale ranging from very satisfied to very dissatisfied. Overall, there was a high level of satisfaction (n=49; 62.8%) expressed by participants who shared their perception of being satisfied (n=45; 57.7%) or very satisfied (n=5; 6.4%). A fifth of respondents (n=16; 20.5%) reported dissatisfaction with support and supervision arrangements, and a further thirteen Classroom Assistants (16.6%) expressed a neutral view in relation to support and supervision.

Question/Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I receive appropriate supervision and support from the SENCO.	n=23 (29.5%)	n=41 (52.6%)	n=5 (6.4%)	n=6 (7.7%)	n=3 (3.8%)
I receive appropriate supervision and support from class teachers	n=4 (5.1%)	n=41 (52.6%)	n=18 (23.1%)	n=13 (16.7%)	n=2 (2.6%)
	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the support and supervision you receive in school for your role as a Classroom Assistant?	n=4 (5.1%)	n=45 (57.7%)	n=13 (16.7%)	n=14 (17.9%)	n=2 (2.6%)

Table 4.21 CA perceptions on Supervision

4.7 Summary of the Findings

4.7.1 CA Sample profile and deployment

The online questionnaire was completed by 78 CAs working in 12 schools with a response rate of 28%. Three-quarters of participants (n=59; 75.6%) were female, aged 18 – 50 (n=61; 78.2%) with an average length of employment as a CA of 5 years and 3 months. A wide range of deployment strategies was in use across the sample, with evidence of ‘one to one’ (n=26; 33.3%), small group (n=49; 62.8%) and whole class CA allocation (n=2; 2.6%). Questionnaire responses indicate predominantly short-term CA-pupil pairings of less than 1 – 2 years (n=60; 76.9%), with a small number of respondents supporting pupils for periods of three years or more (n=18; 23.1%). The majority of Classroom Assistants (n=57; 73.1%) worked within one year group, while a quarter (n=19; 24.4%) reported working across different year groups. Furthermore, CAs in this sample most commonly worked with year eight (n=23; 29.5%) and year eleven pupils (n=25; 32.1%), with fewest participants supporting post-16 pupils (n=10; 12.8%). Respondents reported typically supporting a small range of SEN conditions within the classroom (n=63; 80.8%), typically ASD, ADHD, Dyslexia, SEBD and MLD.

4.7.2 CA Roles

Classroom Assistants described undertaking a wide range of duties related to a multifaceted pupil support role which spanned both direct instruction and non-instructional interactions supporting pupils and teachers, including the provision of educational, organisational, pastoral, social and behavioural support for pupils with

SEN. Less frequent engagement was noted in providing medical support to pupils (n=16; 20.5%) and infrequent clerical support for teachers (n=39; 50.0%).

Educational support was reported as the most frequently provided by CAs (n=62; 79.5%), with assistants in this sample citing direct engagement in teaching and learning activities at post-primary level. Everyday aspects of the role included assisting teachers, monitoring on task behaviour, providing individualised attention, helping with task completion, and differentiating of pupil resources, as well as providing additional or alternative explanations. Participants identified the pupils' desk as the most common location of CA support (n=72; 92.3%). A smaller proportion reported providing access to the curriculum (n=46; 59.0%) or promoting independence through fading support as a regular CA duty (n=30; 38.5%).

The majority of respondents reported frequent involvement in other domains of learning support including the provision of organisational support (n=59; 75.6%) within the wider inclusionary activities of the school. CA organisational support was described as providing feedback to teachers, assisting with exam access and SEN procedures. The majority of Classroom Assistants reported involvement with SEN procedures within their setting, typically familiarity with Statutory Statements of SEN (n=76; 97.4%), attending annual review meetings (n=72; 92.3%) and contributing to pupil reports (n=61; 78.2%).

Approximately two-thirds of CAs (n=48; 61.5%) identified the provision of pastoral support to pupils as a feature of their role, with building a supportive relationship with the pupil considered a core aspect of the role. Half of participants (n=44; 56.4%) indicated supporting pupils' emotional needs as well as anxiety as a condition that was frequently supported by assistants (n=24; 30.8%). Less frequent

involvement for formal pastoral programmes was noted, with CA pastoral support infrequently involving support for ‘soft skills’ such as independence, self-management, confidence, and self-esteem. The majority of respondents (n=63; 80.8%) reported infrequently undertaking safeguarding activities.

Classroom Assistants in this study described their role as including facilitation of social support (n=40; 51.3%) within the mainstream community including peer interactions (n=78; 100.0%), facilitating friendships (n=77; 98.7%) and informal home-school communication (n=52; 66.7%). Facilitating interactions between pupils and their teachers was noted as an everyday feature of the CA support (n=46; 59.0%). Supporting pupil behaviour was described as an everyday aspect of the role for approximately one-third of participants (n=30; 38.5%), undertaking occasional management of low-level disruptive behaviour inside (n=75; 96.2%) and outside the classroom (n=74; 94.9%) in addition to supporting more challenging pupil behaviours (n=47; 60.3%).

4.7.3 CA Preparation

Respondents reported an eclectic mix of qualifications; over half of Classroom Assistants held qualifications which exceeded the role specification at level 4 and above. A number of CAs were qualified teachers (n=13; 16.7%) and a small number (n=9; 11.5%) reported undertaking postgraduate qualifications relevant to SEN. A quarter of participants (n=20; 25.6%) reported undertaking a vocational CA qualification. Less than half of respondents (n=34; 43.6%) reported in-service, school-based training in SEN.

Classroom Assistants reported a keen desire for further training (n=51; 65.4%) with a quarter (n=19; 24.4%) unsure of their professional development

needs. Open responses revealed a desire for ‘any’ training or ‘greater knowledge’. CA views on career development was unclear with a fifth of respondents (n=16; 20.5%) expressing a preference for accessing Initial Teacher Education. Despite a desire for training within the dataset, the majority of participants (n=72; 92.3%) reported feeling qualified for their support role. CAs reported that they had little collaborative working with members of teaching staff. Respondents suggested general dissatisfaction (n=24; 30.8%) or uncertainty (n=31; 39.7%) with involvement in planning and preparation with teachers.

4.7.4 Conditions of Employment

Classroom Assistants indicated high levels of job satisfaction (n=56; 71.8%) with the perception of their role being valued by pupils with SEN (n=66; 84.6%) and to a lesser extent by teaching staff (n=38; 48.7%). Role boundaries between teachers and CAs were largely perceived to be clear (n=59; 75.6%) with participants reporting a negative perception of their pay (n=53; 67.9%). A third of respondents (n=26; 33.3%) undertook additional unpaid duties while a quarter did so on a paid basis (n=19; 24.4%).

While the majority of Classroom Assistants (n=59; 75.6%) were involved in induction activities, approximately a quarter (n=19; 24.4%) received an appraisal of their work in the last year. CAs spoke of mixed arrangements for supervision with a quarter (n=21; 26.9%) indicating receiving daily teacher directions. Participants most frequently received supervision from the SENCO (n=26; 33.3%), however a similar number reported never receiving such directions (n=22; 28.2%).

4.8 Findings which inform the qualitative stage

The survey findings suggest potential ambiguity in the concept of CA support as a means of facilitating access to the curriculum for pupils with SEN. Further interview discussion could unpack this concept and explore the ways in which CAs understand their role within inclusive and special education.

A further issue for exploration is CAs' description of the ways in which they work with teachers within the classroom. There is evidence within the questionnaire findings to suggest that CAs perceive this to be a less prominent aspect of their classroom practice, with a small proportion of assistants suggesting that they never receive teacher directions (n=5; 6.4%), teacher supervision from a Form Tutor (n=34; 43.6%), nor a subject teacher (n=31; 39.7%) which invites further examination of the collaboration, communication, and supervision methods for assistants in post-primary schools.

Finally, the questionnaire revealed a lack of uniformity in the ways in which CAs prepared for employment supporting pupils with SEN. This included a diverse range of professional and qualification backgrounds for assistants in this sample, with reports of a mixture of vocational and in-service training options and postgraduate qualifications. Despite a desire for further training expressed by participants throughout the dataset, the majority of CAs (n=72; 92.3%) reported feeling qualified for their support role. Such dissonance highlights the need for closer engagement and discussion with CAs on the regional context of role preparation in Northern Irish secondary schools.

4.9 Conclusion

The initial, exploratory, quantitative phase of the research provided a detailed account of the CA role, CA preparation for SEN support including qualifications, training and professional development and collaborative working, as well as CA perspectives on the conditions of employment and supervision arrangements. These findings suggest that CAs undertake a wide ranging and multifaceted role which has evolved into significant engagement with pupils with SEN. They have illuminated key issues to be examined in greater detail in the qualitative phase. Chapter Five presents an interpretation of findings from the qualitative phase of the research which seek to further elicit and listen to the practitioner voice to provide greater insight and understanding of the range of issues illuminated through the questionnaire data.

Chapter Five: Qualitative Findings

5.0 Chapter Outline

The purpose of this chapter is to present a qualitative interpretation of Classroom Assistants' (CAs) conceptualisations on their work in support of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in post-primary schools in NI. The chapter provides a brief overview of the qualitative phase of the research, including the data collection and thematic analysis procedure. The findings are summarised visually in a thematic map and presented in detail. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

5.1 Overview of the Qualitative Phase

This phase of the research was informed by two preceding activities; firstly, the themes presented in the literature review were used to inform the design of an interview schedule which guided semi-structured telephone interviews with participants. Secondly, findings from the quantitative survey were used to identify key areas for further illumination. Semi-structured telephone interviews sought to draw out the views and perceptions of CAs on a range of themes relating to their roles and employment within post-primary schools in NI. The interview schedule was piloted and further refined with a group comprising a SENCO and two CAs employed in post-primary schools outside of the sample (Section 3.5.3).

A convenience sample of 28 participants identified from phase one were contacted for the qualitative phase. The format of the interview was amended in March 2020 in response to the closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic from in-person to telephone interviews to comply with the safety restrictions in operation at the time. Telephone interviewing was considered an appropriate option

to ensure the continuation of the research and to make accessible contact with participants. Over the course of March - May 2020, telephone interviews were recorded with 19 CAs employed across 12 post-primary schools (Section 3.5.4).

Following transcription, interview data was analysed using thematic analysis (Section 3.5.5). This was deemed an appropriate method to address the research aims. The researcher adapted the iterative approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) with the use of Nvivo software to comprehensively aid analysis of the qualitative data set. The focus of the analysis was identification of patterned meaning constructed as themes and sub-themes within participants' accounts of their views and experiences. The analysis presented, therefore, is broad and descriptive, focusing on participants' meanings and experiences across four interrelated themes of relevance to addressing the following research questions.

1. How do CAs describe and characterise their classroom support role in post-primary settings?
2. How do CAs prepare for their role in post-primary settings?
3. What are CA perceptions of their conditions of employment as paraprofessionals within the educational workforce?
4. What does this research tell us about the contribution of CAs in supporting pupils with statements of SEN in post-primary settings?

The analysis utilises a frequency convention to illustrate the prevalence of patterns across the interviews. While themes were not devised on the basis of frequency, this method is useful to demonstrate recurrent patterns across the data set. This is presented in the Table 5.1 below.

Term used	Number of participants
Many, or most of the participants	15 – 19 participants
A significant number of participants, the majority of participants	10 – 15 participants
Several participants	5 – 10 participants
A small number, a few, or a minority of participants	1 – 5 participants

Table 5.1 Frequency of responses in Qualitative data

Transcriptions were anonymised in accordance with the ethical procedure for the research. However, a small number of participants were keen to share views on their title and to differentiate their perceived role from the generic title of Classroom Assistant used in the title of this research. As a result, the decision was taken to include the role titles used by participants. Participants are therefore identified as Classroom Assistant (CA), Learning Support Assistant (LSA), Special Needs Assistant (SNA) and Teaching Assistant (TA). One title was overly distinctive and so was modified to maintain confidentiality of participants in this school.

5.2 Presentation of Findings

Thematic analysis utilises a thematic map as a key analytic stage in the analysis procedure to create a visual representation of themes and to assist with theme development and the organisation of the analysis. The map below outlines the four themes which structure this analysis focusing on practitioners' conceptualisations their work including 'CA Support at Post-Primary', 'CA Practice', 'CA Preparation' and 'CAs as Paraprofessionals'. Each theme comprises a number of sub-themes which encapsulate patterns of perceptions across the interviews.

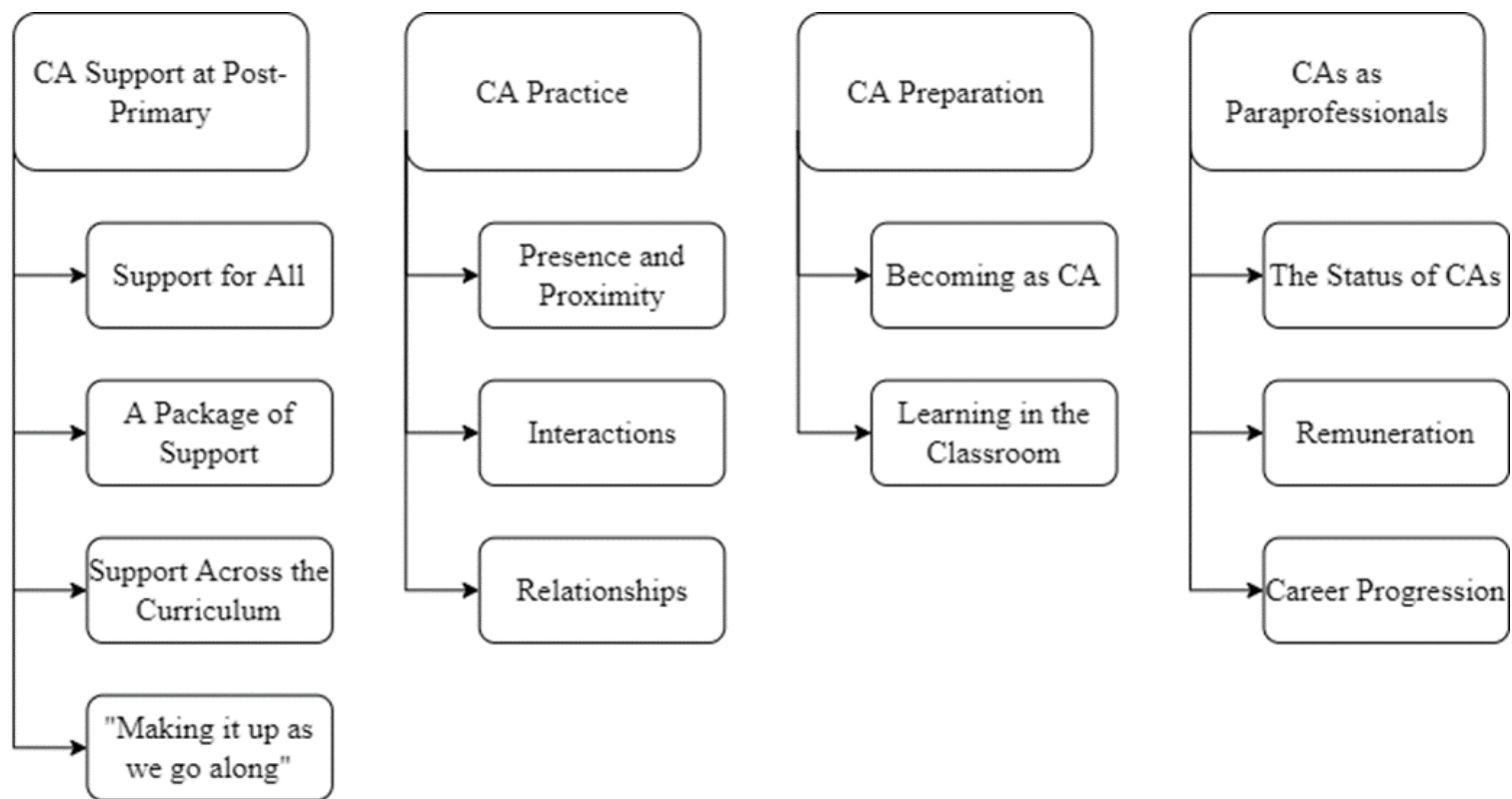


Figure 5.1 Thematic Map

5.3 CA Support at Post-Primary

As an overarching theme, ‘CA Support at Post-Primary’ explores CA characterisations of the distinct elements of support work in the post-primary phase. Participants constructed an array of conceptualisations of their role explored across the four sub-themes. Firstly, ‘support for all’ explores CAs accounts of their support for pupils with and without statements of SEN and the ambiguity inherent in providing both general and specialised support. A second sub-theme ‘a package of support’ unpacks CA descriptions of support into distinct domains of support to examine the multi-faceted contributions of CAs. The third sub-theme ‘support across the curriculum’ captures CA accounts of their experiences providing support to pupils across multiple subject areas. A final sub-theme of ‘making it up as we go along’ draws together the collective construction of how CAs understand the nature of their support roles.

5.3.1 Support for All

“First of all, I can see my role is to support pupils with any kind of broad spectrum of difficulties...” (TA 9).

All participants shared a view of their role as broad and inclusive of any *‘problems and statements and diagnosis’* (SNA 1) a pupil may have. CAs described their role as helping pupils to *‘meet their own potential, whatever that looks like’* (CA 1). The nature of support provided was described as highly contextualised to individual pupils and something which organically evolved throughout their school career.

“We have everything ... not just on the ASD spectrum, we have boys with physical needs, and we have boys with cochlear implants. We have boys with

sight issues, so every single boy and I am sure every single child with a statement has all very different needs and therefore trying to tell one CA that they have to do something one particular way or tell us all ... is never going to work because you have to tailor everything you do, in every circumstance to suit that one boy as nothing else would work, you have to tailor it to him and what works for him at that moment in time” (CA 2).

CA involvement was portrayed as a general supplementary support for all pupils within the mainstream environment. A significant number of participants reported their role as occupying a mediating position between the teacher and the pupil, with the assistant interacting primarily with pupils as an accessible and immediate point of contact.

“... although you're employed to work with a statemented pupil, you are fundamentally there ... you find yourself it's actually other pupils in the class that are relying on you more or asking you for help... you are the other adult in the room ... the pupils view you as not quite the teacher, so you are sort of a safe bridge, you know, if they don't understand something they will ask you before they will go to the teacher...” (CA 1).

CA comments indicated that specialised support for targeted pupils was provided under the guise of support for all, an approach suggested as facilitating the inclusion of increasing numbers of pupils with and without statements of SEN inside and outside of the classroom. The presence of the assistant was perceived as offering informal support to other pupils, normalising the presence of an additional adult in the classroom environment, and reducing the feelings of difference a pupil with SEN may feel.

“We are just there for one student but then they all come and ask us for help. I like when the other students asked me for help because they also remove focus for my student, so he doesn’t just feel like I’m just there to help him. I’m also helping students in the class, which makes him feel more included in the class” (CA4).

At the same time, CA descriptions of their duties also focused on the provision of specialist support for a specific disability or learning difficulty through the implementation of strategic interventions. CAs reported a wide range of adaptations to classroom resources and the wider school environment to improve accessibility and increase the participation of pupils.

“...you are very close to the pupils and can make very intentional targeted interventions that can work well, because the teacher has the big picture and just simply doesn’t have the time to work one on one to such precision that I can. I am almost like the surgeon who can make a very precise intervention” (CA 5).

A small number of participants described their role exclusively in relation to their allocated pupils. One TA articulated this view in his characterisation of himself as ‘personal assistant’.

“I was his personal assistant so I would write down his homework, I would photocopy notes, and remind him of deadlines I would sit at the back of the classroom and try as much as possible to be available to him ... my student was my number one concern” (TA3).

Whilst the majority of participants sought to redress the view of their role as ‘one to one’ pupil support, by emphasising their support for all pupils requesting

help, ultimately CA deployment was acknowledged as dependent on ‘contact hours’ with allocated pupils which the CA often balanced with the needs of all pupils’ within the classroom.

“I do go around and help everyone, so it doesn’t draw attention to the fact that I am allocated to work with pupils in that room, which I think’s important when you’re working with teenagers, but at the same time, you have to focus in on those two students that you have hours for” (CA6).

A few participants reiterated the tensions of balancing general and specialised support, with pupil needs, highlighting the ambiguity at the core of learning support.

“... I know what it means to be a classroom assistant. The job description tells you that you are there to assist ... (pause) but to assist needs to be better clarified. It’s like you are only one person, you cannot be here and there as well. If there are so many needy pupils, obviously you can’t be there for everyone. So, you have to prioritise who you can help at any one time” (TA9).

“I don’t know... it’s impossible to work out what we do, because we just do that much every day... There are limits to what we should be doing, but because our contract states ‘and any other duties’ we don’t really know what the limits are” (TA 4).

“You feel like you take on the role of nearly five or six jobs in one job”(SNA 1).

The reported breadth and flexibility of the CA role also extended the across curriculum, with the provision of educational, organisational, pastoral, social and behavioural support.

5.3.2 A Package of Support

Classroom Assistants' descriptions of their duties provided a rich and detailed insight into the ways in which pupils were supported at post-primary level. From the interviews, it was possible to further classify the range of CA support into five interwoven domains of pupils' school experience, complementing the findings of the previous quantitative phase.

5.3.2.1 Educational Support

All participants described providing support for pupil learning; most often, this was phrased in terms of additional in-class support alongside the class teacher. This provision ranged from assisting pupil(s) participation in lessons to more specialised and individualised instructional support. Participants' comments were grounded in a shared commitment to enhancing curriculum access and reducing barriers to learning through additional accommodations or adaptations specific to a pupil's SEN or relating to the pupils' Individual Education Plan (IEP), now known as a Personal Learning Plan (PLP). A plethora of examples were provided; reading, and scribing for pupils, adaptation of resources, use of software and providing additional and alternative instructions.

“He needed me there to read questions, he needed me there to scribe his answers. He was perfectly capable of telling me the answer, he could retain the information when the teacher explained things in the class, he just needed someone to scribe for him as he couldn't do ... he couldn't write, he even struggled to spell his own name. If I wasn't there, he would be completely lost in the classroom”(TA 6).

One-to-one support through pupil withdrawal from the classroom was mentioned by the majority of assistants as a regular feature of their role. Withdrawal is the provision of support to pupils outside of the classroom, which as a form of inclusive provision, is often criticised but remains symptomatic of the dilemmas at the heart of inclusive education. It was possible to gain CA perspectives on this practice.

“Whenever the teacher cannot deal with it adequately... I suppose we do then pick it up and do the alternate. It's like alternative education. So, the ones that you know, that can't fit in with the lesson, whether it's a behaviour thing or an educational thing or an emotional thing. When they're feeling really upset that they can't sit in class, you take them out for a little walk around calm them down... having a panic attack, talk through things like that, talk through wellbeing and social skills and bring them back to class. Maybe then they're a bit better, bit more suited to go in and learn” (CA8).

5.3.2.2 Organisational Support

All participants identified undertaking organisational support for pupils with SEN, characterised as a co-ordinating function that they undertook on behalf the school, teachers and of individual pupils and were conceptualised in various ways. One TA offered her perception of her role as that of ‘an assistant form tutor’ as she took on numerous organisational aspects of the daily classroom activities and would address problems as they arose throughout the school day.

“It isn't actually the most visible part of the role. It isn't stated as much as you actually do and have to get involved in because the teacher can't leave their class to see to something and you feel that the students should be in

their lessons learning so you often you are doing quite a bit for the running around in the background of the school helping with the organization.” (TA 7).

Support for assessment, specifically exam access arrangements, was articulated as a key area of responsibility by the majority of CAs within this study. Exam access had become an additional aspect of their role, including preparing pupils for the assessment, facilitation of access arrangements for internal and external exams such as reading, scribing, and additional time concessions as well as providing emotional support to pupils throughout the assessment period.

“In preparing for the exam, we practised for months. She never elaborated and she wouldn’t expand on answers. She would have given you a statement, you know in practice sessions, and I would have went and... because... and she would have went ‘oh because...’ and then expanded on an answer. But if you had have left her to her own devices, she would have just given a statement. So as time went on, I just had to look at her and she would go ‘because...’. (laughter) The obviously on the day of the exam I couldn’t give her that look, I couldn’t prompt her because now she knew as we had practised it for so long it just came easier” (TA 8).

“... you, for some boys, set the scene and the tone of how they are going to perform and that is quite a challenge actually because you do have to get it right because those are quite crucial moments for the boys” (CA 2).

For several CAs organisational support was discussed in relation to discrete supports in line with the pupil(s) IEP or PLP. One CA described supporting transition and preparing a pupil for the transition to further education.

“I got her sorted with, you know those colleges that do the level two as well as doing a course and she wanted to do childcare and stuff. So I went to her house, met her, went with her on the bus to the colleges so she seen what way where she would go, how she would get there because she was nervous about all that kind of stuff. And took her going to college, spoke to a member of staff who came and showed us round and everything so she could choose where she wanted to go.” (TA 5).

5.3.2.3 Pastoral Support

“We're sort of the eyes and ears for different departments. We're kind of eyes and ears of the SEN department and of the pastoral team” (TA2).

Pastoral support was another feature of CA provision, with descriptions evidencing a diverse range of input that spanned emotional aspects of learning, providing emotional support and anxiety management. All but one participant stressed the importance of pastoral support for pupils' mental health, with an acknowledgement of the wide-ranging issues that these young people faced, both in terms of their developmental stage as well as the difficulties associated with SEN, inclusion, and participation in mainstream schools.

“I do believe that without my role, teachers would not be able to function in a classroom with the complex needs of the students that are now seen in schools, not necessarily just learning needs, but also additional needs that come from mental health problems, that a lot of the time the support comes from the CA in the class and not the teacher” (TA6).

Keeping pupils calm and safe were underlying aspects of the pastoral support provided by CAs, made explicit by a significant number of CAs reporting actions

taken to minimise pupil anxiety within the school environment, and to respond to pupil concerns.

“Everything that is needed to keep them calm...if it means leaving classes and moving on to the next that 5 or 10 minutes earlier” (CA 8).

“It is kind of a strange, distressing thing to be the first port of call for something ... It's an awful lot of weight on our shoulders to try and take something like that on. ... It's still kind of tough to kind of deal with. There is some, like, more kind of distressing issues that require sort of more robust pastoral responses. So, like there's been instances of self-harm and children having full blown meltdowns” (TA 2).

5.3.2.4 Social Support

“We have an absolutely huge pastoral role because we facilitate a lot of our pupils' friendships” (CA 4).

A further key aspect of the Classroom Assistant support highlighted the facilitation of relationships between pupils and their peers. Social support for pupils in the classroom and wider school environment was regarded as an important feature of inclusion within the mainstream for pupils with SEN. A significant number of participants related their role in helping to support pupil to develop positive peer support networks within school. The facilitation of social interventions such as Friendships Circles and extra-curricular activities was noted by a few participants who suggested their role developing social skills and peer supports more broadly outside of the classroom.

“In my context, I think I sort of it like it goes beyond mere just kind of facilitating education. We're looking into all kinds of other stuff, like kind of getting the kids sort of socialising a lot more because that can be a can be like kind of a problem that needs solved... We run, lunchtime clubs and stuff to help some of the younger kids find, like a core set of kids that they can hang out with” (TA2).

5.3.2.5 Behavioural Support

“My role is to support them within the classroom, for example, some students might have social emotional behavioural difficulties and it's getting them to be able to be in that classroom environment and sort of to support them moderate their behaviour and not just speaking whatever way they want ... to the teacher (TA6).

Closely linked to educational, pastoral and social supports, CA perceptions of their role included behaviour management. Descriptions ranged from supporting teachers with classroom management to more individualised interventions that enabled pupil participation in classroom activities. Managing the behaviour of pupils was identified by a significant number of assistants as the most challenging aspect of their work within the post-primary setting.

“You try to have a good relationship with them, and you want to have a good relationship with them. But sometimes with that good relationship goes a bit of ... our authority and to manage that is sometimes a challenge. We need to choose our battles. You cannot be fighting with them all the time” (CA4).

Several participants identified this support as protecting pupil learning opportunities from the disruption of others as well as working to prevent disruptive and challenging behaviours on an individualised basis.

“... As a CA you are there to support learning and when the difficult behaviour happens, you are there and you have to do something ... because otherwise there is no learning taking place, there's no focus and there's nothing. It's another job on top of the job that you have to do because you have to deal with the disruptive pupil while the teacher is teaching their lesson. You have to do this sometimes almost to protect and support your pupil” (TA9).

“The children with the challenging behaviour, I think you go way over for them. Sometimes you try to keep them out of trouble ... try to stop it before it happens because, you know them so well, that you can tell by the look on their face or as they walk in the door as to whether or not they're going to explode ...” (TA 4).

Across this sub-theme, the majority of participants stressed the holistic nature of support for pupils, with several CAs suggesting that the role meant going beyond the job description to meet the diverse needs of pupils. The perceived value of such a flexible and multifaceted support system for pupils was best articulated by one Teaching Assistant.

“... Whenever I went to school, there was never anything ... there was never any kind of support like this. There was never anyone in the classroom who had your back and would help you out. Even if you weren't, you know, like on the SEN register, there was no one there who would support students other

than the teachers and it depended very much on your teachers. But you know, it's good seeing these kids have a level of support now that wasn't there and that I can be part of that is I think it is a very positive thing. I think it is a good step for education to have people on the ground, you know, they're not necessarily kind of authority figures like teachers or senior staff, but the kids can come to you, and you know, have a level of expertise that you can give to them without, you know, the kind of conditionality ... there's no effect beyond just helping them, I think. There are consequences with teachers sometimes if you say you haven't done this, or, you're struggling with that. But they know that they don't have that, you're purely there for them” (TA2).

5.3.3 Support Across the Curriculum

“...it's not just doing work for the kids or it's not just doing the photocopying, cutting the fruit or putting the displays on the wall actually, you know, particularly in post-primary settings quite often, you know, you're being expected to have a working knowledge across the curriculum, at GCSE or A level which actually, a subject specific teacher doesn't know, they don't know the spec of eight or ten different subjects. They don't know how the exams are made up. They don't know the controlled assessment guidelines, but actually we do. That's part of our role” (CA 1).

A further subtheme within CA characterisations of their role was the experience of providing support across all curricular areas at post-primary level. Several participants detailed having to develop a wide breadth and depth of curricular knowledge across multiple subjects. Moving between classrooms with different subject teachers meant there were limited opportunities for planning with teachers so

the acquisition of curriculum knowledge ‘*on the job*’, often involved picking up necessary information and proficiencies alongside pupils.

“But, you know, it is through that we don’t have to know the curriculum inside out, but as a CA you pretty much do. If you have a child sitting beside you that is extremely weak, perhaps you know they are going to get behind with the teacher needing to move on, you need to be able to know what you are saying, repeating those instructions... We do actually need to know so much, you really need to have a grasp of the whole curriculum yourself” (TA 8).

However, amongst CAs consensus was divided on the need to have subject knowledge acquired through higher education or professional development. For several assistants, the possession of curricular knowledge and expertise was positively perceived as enabling enhanced provision for pupils and opportunities for collaboration with teachers, in addition to contributing to the extracurricular activities. This is another example of an inherent expectation to go beyond the remit of the role in order to be a good assistant.

“I’m lucky. I’m really happy that I’m in a school where I’ve been allowed to use my background if that makes sense. That’s what I like about where I am at the moment, I’ve been able to all use those skills...” (CA6).

A few CAs emphasised the benefits of a close-knit CA team and flexible deployment arrangements which allowed CAs to co-ordinate learning support for pupil(s) in curricular areas or subjects in which they had a particular interest or knowledge.

“We have that flexibility ... in secondary, that's so important and especially for the exam, because we all come from different backgrounds... Maybe a colleague can help my student better than I in that class, for example, if I know that we are studying something, and I really don't get that concept... I can help them with science with chemistry, physics wherever they need”
(CA4).

However, for a similar proportion of participants, the expectation of subject knowledge was not within their remit and this distinction delineated the assistant role from that of the teacher. The breadth and depth of subject knowledge was noted as one of the key tensions in perceptions which simultaneously blurred and reinforced the boundary between teaching and non-teaching activities. For a few assistants, lack of subject knowledge highlighted the need for teacher support for both the pupil and the assistant.

“There is a limit to what level we can academically support within sort of those specialist subjects, you know....There is a point at which the maths becomes too difficult, and you just can't as someone who hasn't maybe done a degree in maths. You know, you can't provide that support, there is a time at which our support has to come from the teacher... I think that's appropriate; I think we need to know as LSAs what limitations are” (LSA1).

Finally, the possession of curricular knowledge was viewed as having limited value by a small number of assistants working. Amongst these assistants, subject knowledge was perceived as secondary to SEN knowledge and the expertise to support the diverse disabilities and conditions of pupils within the school environment.

“If you are going in to support a student with autism or ADHD, it is no good to just have like a history degree” (TA6).

5.3.4 “Making it up as we go”

A final subtheme captured CAs’ perceptions of the autonomy they held in their role at post-primary level. Throughout the interviews, a significant number of CAs were keen to characterise the experience of *‘shaping the role’* for themselves. This view of the individually determined nature of the role was associated with the intuitive, ad hoc, and evolving nature of learning support which required CAs to often rely on their own personal judgements and decisions in the provision of personalised support for individual pupils.

“... to be a classroom assistant, there's not a guide that you can follow. Of course, we know our duties and which ones are our main responsibility. But then depending on the class we have, depending on the students we have, and the type of special needs ... we build our job every day... I think there's not a specific role, we have our main responsibilities, but then we adapt” (CA4).

In addressing this, a number of assistants emphasised the limitations of the generic job description and the associated lack of guidance on the role in post-primary schools; this had led a significant number of participants to determining their own approach to supporting both pupils and teachers as well as the level of their involvement inside and outside the classroom.

“I don't know if it would ever be possible to write a job description to be to be perfectly honest.... It depends on the individual doing the job ... I think maybe people can do as much or as little as they're comfortable within that

job description. It is maybe easy to say, I only have to do this or I'm only here to do that, whereas if you are naturally the type of person to sort of see things and take that on, then you can sort of adapt that job description to fit what you are doing. Again, it depends on the scenario that you're in, but I would certainly say that it would be fairly common that people would be doing a lot more than what they are specified on paper to be doing” (CA1).

A recurrent thread throughout assistants’ interviews, most notably amongst those working in a grammar setting, was an appreciation for CA flexibility provided by school leadership, notably the SENCO, which encouraged CAs to develop a sense of ownership of their role to which they could bring their own particular knowledge, strengths and skills.

“It is up to you to make your own role. You need to have a framework anyway... it's up to the SENCO and up to the school to give you that framework and to put in place the basic structure of what it is that you are needing to do and what you are there to achieve. But I do think very much, you need to take the role on yourself ... Probably quite a lot of what I do isn't in my job description, but I do it because I think it makes me a better assistant” (CA7).

A minority of assistants were keen to specify their own unique understanding of their support role which they believed differed from the generic CA role, each offering a subjective and nuanced view of their position in secondary and grammar contexts.

“... for me, the term CA makes me think of someone who is in one classroom ... I sort of class it more with a primary setting somebody who works one to

one, perhaps with one teacher, or, you know, it's more involved. ... Whereas I would more in secondary school we would definitely term ourselves more as LSAs, because I don't feel we're really there specifically to support teaching staff. Albeit I'm happy to do you know, I'm happy to photocopy But definitely my role there is to support ... more specifically to support the learning of someone who has a statement of need, that is probably why I would term myself more an LSA.” (LSA1)

“I am being pedantic, but my title wasn't actually a CA, it was a TA and I know I have used the term personal assistant, but I believe I was responsible for the student himself, rather than the classroom. Being a CA is something different here. So ... I see my role as being a lot more responsible for the student himself. I think a CA and TA means two different things ... like that they are two different roles” (TA3).

A significant sub-theme across participants' accounts of their work in post-primary was the highly individualised nature of the role, the limited job description and guidance, and support of school leaders to devise a role for themselves. The following theme constructs CA characterisations of the ways in which they relate to both pupil and teachers within and beyond the classroom at post-primary level.

5.4 CA Post-Primary Practice

A second theme ‘CA Post-Primary Practice’ describes in detail the nature and level of engagement of CA with class teacher and pupils through three interrelated subthemes: ‘presence and proximity’, ‘interaction’ and ‘relationships’. Each sub-theme is sub-divided into two parts, with assistants’ accounts of their work with both teachers and pupil(s), and negotiation of a range of physical and relational boundaries in the classroom.

5.4.1 Presence and Proximity

Pupils

For several participants, their support was a discreet presence in classrooms.

Assistants described a sense of invisibility or a low profile which they believed enhanced their auxiliary position. Several assistants reported acting as ‘*the silent helper in the class*’ with the use of non-verbal communication as an essential aspect of the classroom support.

“I could probably tell my boy anything or not to do anything, just by looking at him and that is because we spend so much time with them and get to know them so well” (CA2).

This CA achieved an unobtrusive presence by blending in as a member of the class with the pupils.

“... when they’re sitting talking about what they did at the weekend and they don’t even notice the fact that I’m there is quite satisfying as I just think, you know, this is it. Having me there and I am not intruding” (CA2).

Several participants described their presence as representing a source of comfort to pupils who could seek out support when needed.

“Sometimes it's just being there as a figure of support and it's massive for some children ... as a classroom assistant, not even doing anything for some children... Even me being in the room with him calms him down and that allows him to work better because ... if I am not there then he might feel automatically vulnerable or automatically worried ... you know, ‘what if I get this wrong and I am too afraid to ask my teacher or too nervous to ask my friend?’” (SNA1).

Being ‘available’ or maintaining a proximity to respond to pupil requests for support was an important feature of CA support in post-primary classrooms, maintaining this supportive presence was explained as balancing the need for reassurance and promoting independence through careful positioning in the classroom.

“But they still always want to know sort of where you are, they're still kind of looking out for you. They don't want you right beside them, hovering over their shoulder you know, just even you being there in the class sometimes is helpful” (TA 7).

The majority of assistants stressed the importance of managing their proximity to pupils inside and outside the classroom, with recognition of the personal and social implications for pupils of CA support necessitating CAs to maintain a thoughtful distance in the post-primary setting.

“I would leave the classroom maybe two to three minutes before the bell rings and walk on to the next class because I didn't want my pupil to think

that I followed him around the corridors, as you know that is not really the self-image that a 16-year-old boy wants to have being followed by a CA”
(SNA1).

Within classrooms, participants reported a tension between assuming a peripheral ‘floating’ position and sitting alongside pupils; the majority of CAs suggested that a suitable place at the back of the room, observing the learning activities and allowing pupils the opportunity for independent work, as best practice. This was articulated by one assistant.

“The temptation is that you're right beside them ready to step in, as soon as they start something, but I think it's about learning to have that distance both ... physically and in terms of the amount of time that you give them to do something. You're not just constantly sort of a helicopter beside them ... I think it's positioning yourself where you're useful but where you're not intrusive or really obvious, I think. I personally feel like the role is to offer support but not to dominate and not to ... be the main part of it” (CA1).

Proximity was used as a tool to develop both pupil independence and their receptiveness to CA support. A small number of CAs suggested that their position within the classroom was negotiated with pupils, while several indicated that pupil preference determined CA placement. Sitting beside pupils was explained by a significant number of CAs as a necessary feature of CA support.

“... There are instances where ... I would need to be seated with the pupil because otherwise he would be just daydreaming sometimes. But then again, it really depends on the pupil and their needs and how well you know them.”
(TA9).

“... having a 50-year-old woman sat beside him... sometimes it is good and he is happy depending on what class we are in and sometimes he will call me over and say ‘look don’t leave me to do this on my own, I can’t’. But other times, I feel it’s really important to let him have a go at something himself ... not surrounding him, not being too close but to be hovering there for him. Not being on his back all of the time.” (CA 2).

Teachers

“I think ... you sort of find your feet within each subject of what your role is, and sometimes it’s stepping up more, sometimes it’s stepping back. And again, it changes and evolves ...it’s not necessarily being velcroed to your pupil all the time ... it’s looking at the bigger picture and finding where you can fit” (CA1).

A significant number of assistants reported providing general classroom support for teachers which was contextualised to each classroom. Most often, assistants expressed their view that supporting the teacher meant fitting with the teachers’ practice, being helpful or ‘*of use*’ to the teacher. It was of note that, for a small proportion of assistants, this meant seeking out direction, being available to teachers in the course of a lesson and following teacher instructions. Assistants provided a range of examples of working collaboratively in support of teachers.

“ If the teacher was giving out notes, I would hand out the notes, just you know ... to keep active, be as helpful as possible” (TA2).

“In every way, in every aspect of the pastoral and the academic, mentoring and sometimes in classroom management ... Teachers in my school, use you in all sorts of different ways, you know, some will maybe send you away to do

some photocopying, where others will say 'look I'm not explaining this particularly well, Miss. Can you explain it for me? type of thing". (CA2)

For a small number of participants, the presence of the assistant was perceived by CAs to reinforce the teacher's role as 'reassurance' and 'validation', particularly in relation to behaviour management and with newly qualified teachers. A small number of assistants outlined their perception of the benefits of CA support for teachers.

"Teachers ... like working with the classroom assistants because it makes their lives a lot easier" (TA2).

"Teachers have been appreciative that I am doing that bit extra and I am open and honest with them, I'm looking up stuff or I'm putting together something to either help my pupil or to help the class" (CA7).

Interestingly, the issue of place and proximity was relevant to CAs understanding of their support for teachers in the classroom as well, including the need to 'stand back', 'doing nothing' or 'fitting in' to the teachers' lesson.

"...you have to give them teachers their place and stand back. I can never dominate in a classroom. Everything you do has to always to be quite stealth like" (TA4).

For a small number of assistants, variations in teachers' understanding of their work with SEN pupils pointed to a general lack of understanding about the role of assistants at post-primary level.

"There's a contingent of teachers sometimes who don't appreciate the role. I think it's maybe because they don't understand it, or they don't think it's

necessary, but ... whenever you're dealing with someone who, you know, thinks you're basically their PA, sometimes (laughter) you know, you can kind of get frustrated and quite annoyed because, you know, they're taking you away from what it is your job is” (TA2).

A few assistants stressed the importance of sensitivity in regard to the boundaries between themselves and their teaching colleagues, with a small number of assistants pointing to the lack of clarity and understanding of each other's classroom duties. This is illustrated in the following extracts:

“It is very important for us to understand our role, our position in the school, and to not play some other role that you are not meant to” (CA 5).

“A big part of it is a lack of clarity and understanding as to what the role actually entails, like, where that line is But I think maybe there's the boundary between the two that can be difficult sometimes because there is an expectation, sometimes that you should be doing more or less, so it is hard to know really where that line is” (LSA1).

Overall, assistants held mixed viewpoints on professional role boundaries, with some acknowledging the distinction between the CA and teacher roles while others reported a more equitable view which had the potential to cause role conflict.

“I'm not the teacher, that would be the main primary source. If it was something that he is struggling on, then he would ask me as a secondary. We are the secondary role at the end of the day. I am not the primary one ... I think sometimes you get involved in the job and you have got to sometimes hold yourself back so you have always got to be the secondary and the

teacher is always the primary and we don't cross that boundary, shall we say" (CA3).

A similar proportion perceived their role in the classroom as informal teaching shared between the assistant and the teacher.

"... In some classes we are almost pitched alongside the teachers, and we will take half a class and teach them ... teachers, certainly where we are, trust you to teach them the work if it has not gone well in class. You can take them away and actually teach the piece of work to them" (CA2).

"There can be an issue when we are called "non-teaching staff". For CAs, that can be a big bugbear as, from the CA perspective, we are actually helping to teach them. We were explaining things to them and in a way is that not teaching them as well? I think that, Yes, you have the title of teacher, but we are supporting you in that teaching. Some pupils are disapplied from some subjects, so our role is then as a CA to take them off to do work with them. So, we are doing a form of extra teaching with them. Being called a "non-teacher", although I understand that not all of us have the teaching qualification, but we are still helping and teaching them, so it is little things like that" (CA7).

Specific examples of role confusion were also offered by participants, with a recurrent observation that their role was misunderstood by teaching staff. CAs related examples in which they felt that poor understanding of the role could result in teacher directions to undertake administrative duties at the expense of supporting pupils.

“The teachers think that you are there as their assistant as opposed to the pupils. They would get you in the middle of class to go and make copies for them. They really view you as their assistant. I would often ask whenever we are in class and I am handing stuff out, I would say ‘do you need a hand with that?’ but whenever they are asking me to leave the classroom environment and that means that I don’t get those contact hours with my pupil, which teachers frequently do it” (CA8).

The next sub-theme interprets patterns in the interview data relating to interactions between CAs and pupils and with teachers.

5.4.2 Interactions

Pupils

A defining aspect of CA explanations of their support for pupils involved the multifaceted and complex nature of their interactions with pupils.

“My concern is not just with teaching; I can enjoy that with the boys I can work individually with each one of them and see them grow and seeing them learning and sometimes even listen to the silly things they have to say. But that I like that I ... give them my time As a teacher, sometimes we don't have that time, we are so focused on the curriculum that unfortunately, we don't have the time to sit and listen to the students individually. So as a classroom assistant, we have that opportunity and that focus. I really enjoy that” (CA4).

CA support was characterised by sustained direct interactions with pupils which often contrasted with teacher interactions with pupils. This was made most explicit by a former teacher.

“... I have experience as a teacher, you cannot do that individual responsiveness for an entire class, especially in a post-primary setting where you're with the pupils for 45 minutes a day ... You can't expect the teacher to be able to respond in that kind of a way to a student and to be able to observe all that kind of behaviour. The good thing about being a TA is that while the teacher is sort of teaching the plenary bit, you can be observing ... It's much more sort of observational and intuitive than teaching is. When you're teaching, you've got so much in your head about what you have to get through to cover the curriculum, particularly in exam classes that you ...

don't always a pick up all the behavioural cues from the students as well as you would want to ... I think you get that kind of better relationship with the pupils, and I felt like I was being more helpful than being a subject teacher, if that makes sense” (TA 5).

Individualised interactions across multiple classroom contexts allowed CAs to develop an enhanced familiarity with pupils and gain a detailed insight into their learning needs; both were viewed as essential elements of CA support. Continuous contact throughout the school day was considered a key facet of pupil support with assistants speaking of their ability to offer pupils both time and attention to pupils as and when required. For a small number of participants this was compared to pupils’ interactions with teachers in the primary phase.

“You are mimicking or continuing on that same kind of contact of the key adult, the stability and the routine is important for a lot of our stage 5 children... that you can be that one consistent person given them support in the classroom ...” (TA7).

A recurrent pattern in the interviews was participants’ focus on ‘*small and meaningful moments*’ of interaction shared with pupils that focused on getting to know pupils, attuned to the small details of their school lives, and celebrating all aspects of their achievement.

“I think you learn to take the little wins and that might be something that seems really insignificant to somebody else. But you think when you have battled with a pupil to get to a certain point, and it is something that they struggle and struggle and struggle with. And then one day they do it, you think well, actually, yeah, that was a good day (laughter)” (CA1).

Teachers

CAs characterised their interaction with teachers as serving a range of functions including providing advice and feedback on pupils, CA signposting potential issues arising within the classroom as well as providing necessary contextual information for other pupil behaviours.

“I see it as really passing information what class is like, what the behaviour is like in general, like, if anyone is maybe in grumpy form, somebody has lost her folder the week before, somebody else doesn't do any work if they sit beside such and such” (TA4)

Moreover, providing advice to the class teacher was also perceived as a regular task for assistants. CAs indicated that their views were often sought by teachers to inform differentiation for pupils with statements of SEN. A small number of CAs also reported being invited to participate in individualised planning for pupils and to collaborate on classroom activities alongside teacher. Such interactions could result in both a positive, and a negative response for assistants.

“... All the teachers they see the CA as a key person in the class. Very often teachers ask for help or ask our opinion ‘Look, what do you think? I want to do this in class, do you think that your student ... what do you think will work better for him?’ (CA4).

At the same time, providing advice to teachers unsolicited was highlighted as a potential cause of conflict between teacher and assistants.

“My role is to support the teacher as well and know what goes on. “That child is not going to respond to the way you're getting on at the minute, you

need to do this, this and this". I've advised teachers, sometimes they haven't maybe wanted it. But I've had to tell them for the good of the student and the rest of the class" (TA5).

Perceptions of responsibility and involvement in SEN provision were also indicated as an ambiguous area for assistants. While the majority of participants suggested support for both the teacher and pupils enhanced the accessibility of classroom activities for pupils with SEN, a small number indicated undertaking a level of responsibility for provision independently of teachers.

"You will get some teachers who don't really care too much about SEN. There is this perception that if there is an assistant in their classroom, they don't have to tailor their approach for the pupils, the assistant will take the approach and tailor it. With those kind of teachers, you just kind of cut your losses, collect the work and go off to the learning support centre and you do tailor whatever work they have to do for them" (CA8).

"You feel like if you were to go to the teacher every single day before every single lesson, 'could you send me that over so that I can adapt that for my pupil?' that you would be a hindrance even though we would actually just be doing your job. So, there's not really a lot of collaboration with teachers at all in my setting" (SNA1).

Such varied interactions were viewed as facilitators and barriers to the development of supportive relationship with pupils and teachers. This will be further examined in the final sub-theme.

5.4.3 Relationships

Pupils

“We give so much more ... because, of course, in our personal relationship and also in the way that we build up our students. There's a lot of trust, too. So, we need to feel happy when we work with them. ... most importantly they need to feel happy when they work with us” (CA4).

A final sub-theme relates to CA descriptions of the nature of their relationships with pupils. A central feature of their role was the building of a personal relationship with pupils that was conducive to inclusive learning, often viewed as a connection that went beyond the classroom. A general view of most participants was that the beginning of the CA-pupil relationship could be a pivotal moment, in some instances initial hostility and rejection of support by adolescent pupils.

“The student that I am currently with, she does appreciate my help and she does want the help but her big thing is she doesn't want to appear different or weird. So if I speak to her it is like, ‘oh you are pointing to me, get away, get away’ that kind of thing so she can be quite grumpy and from time to time, that can be a bit difficult and it is a bit upsetting if somebody is being like that to you. But I know that she will then come and whisper “sorry, it is just the way that I am” (TA1).

This impact of this initial ‘resistance’ to support was articulated by one CA:

“... if you for whatever reason are not accepted into a classroom environment if, it's not working, it can be a really really, really horrible job. You could be isolated; you could find a lot of negativity towards you which

you would be pretty much powerless to do anything about it I think having to live with that all day everyday would be a real struggle” (CA2).

With time and careful management CAs described fostering relationships with pupils; once the ‘resistance’ phase was overcome a strong sense of familiarity developed between pupil and CA, with a few pointing to continued tension in nurturing adolescent friendship.

“I would try to become his friend ... some days you just have to be their friend ... not even for the sake of having a rapport but for your own sanity in the workplace ... constantly fighting with a teenage boy isn’t worth it” (SNA1).

“Most of the time you are with pupils who won’t do work at all and then as soon as they have got someone they like asking them to do the work, then they will do it. They need that additional support or that supportive person being there which I think is one of our main goals as CAs” (CA8).

Participants indicated that their relationships assumed varied functions to meet pupils’ individualised needs. Most prevalent in CA descriptions was that of acting as a pupil confidante. CAs cultivated close relationships with pupils, with a significant number identifying the importance of providing a listening ear. This was emphasised by participants who stressed the pastoral nature of CA relationships with adolescents.

“Being there as somebody that they can trust that they can come to me, whether it be about homework that they need help with or if there's something that, you know, a social situation that they might be not understanding and want to speak to someone about it and maybe a bit

embarrassed to speak to a parent, something like that, that I can either be there that they can speak to, or I will happily bring that to one of our chaplains or heads of year” (CA7).

A recurrent conceptualisation was of the CA as a ‘*pupil guide*’ or offering ‘*a form of friendship*’ to pupils. CAs reported their focus on the holistic development of pupils through personalised support which they believed fostered inclusion in the mainstream classroom. Often comments were linked to the age of pupils, with younger pupils requiring more attention and reassurance, often ‘*treating you like a mum*’. Older pupils were perceived as seeking encouragement and direction navigating the post-primary environment.

“... Your role is for them to get as much out of their education as you can So just being there to you know, explain what's going on and looking out for the emotional wellbeing of the student and guiding them through it The less stress the child will be in, the more likely they're going to be able to do that” (TA 7).

A significant number of CAs reported using their relationships with pupils as a means to foster independence and engagement with a focus on empowering pupils to become more independent within the school environment.

“That’s the focus to make them more independent because that's our goal at the end ... that they don’t need us anymore, that they can work by themselves ... the reality is that they know is that the classroom assistant is an adult there to help them with everything. And they don't need help with everything, that is what we need to make them see... most things you can do by yourself. And I think ... that is as important as an academic help we give them, that

help for them to become independent ... that they lose the help of their CA.

But that is what we want” (CA 4).

Advocacy for pupils also featured in CA descriptions of their relationships. A small number of participants described instances of ‘*speaking up for the pupil*’ and ‘*fighting for your pupil*’.

“So, the children know you as an adult in that room, that you know the truth. The kids come to trust you; they think “I know you'll have my back if something goes wrong here...”. I think that there's a real strong trust there, there is a really strong rapport... if you get on well with the children that is” (SNA1).

“That’s kind of the core thing about being a TA, you’re there, you're in the middle, you're seeing all this behaviour and interaction between all the teachers, students, and you're the only one that sees that. You have to sort of make sure that you have to be an advocate for both and can't let the kids be ridiculous to certain members of staff. And you can let the staff discriminate against the kids or you as a TA” (TA5).

Teachers

“Every teacher is different and likes to do things differently ... I think responding to things in classrooms is very much something we kind of tailor and you work with the individual teacher, it can change completely year from year depending on what subjects the kids have got and what classes you're placed with” (TA2).

CA relationships with the subject teacher were described as highly dependent on personality, receptivity, and classroom practice, with such inter-personal dynamics impacting the collaborative relationship formed.

“It’s about ... (pause) how you make a good relationship with the students, but also about forming a good relationship with the teachers as well. And once the teachers know what your capabilities are, that’s how you’re able to form your little ... kind of unique way of doing stuff, your own unique practice ... way of doing it. And that’s why you end up ... particularly in a post-primary school, you can end up taking on very different roles in different subjects and with different teachers because it depends on ... (pause) what they want you to do and what they feel they want to allow you to do, and... (pause) especially within your own capabilities and the knowledge in that subject” (TA5).

Several assistants suggested the extent to which they could collaborate in classroom activities with teachers was similarly conditional on the ‘acceptance’ of CAs within their classrooms.

“There are some teachers who maybe don’t really like having a CA in the class and that can be quite evident. They are quite vocal in some ways, I think, that they do not like having CAs in their class... They just ... if a pupil dares ask me anything, they’re jumping down my throat. ‘You don’t ask them, you ask me, I am the teacher and that’s not why they’re there’. But I feel like, I would need to explain that this is why I am here, if my pupil asks me a question, that is part of my role. There are others who absolutely love having you there” (CA8).

For a small number of assistants, relationships with teachers depended on variations in teachers' understanding and appreciation of their work in support of pupils with SEN.

"... a lot of teachers that have been traditionally based in grammar schools, there is that uncertainty as to what the role of the CA is ... the ways in which we could be used, whereas that sort of traditional grammar school, there was still ... not suspicion, but certainly kind of maybe an uncertainty as to exactly why you were there and why you were needed" (CA1).

A key dimension of CA perceptions focussed significantly on the relationship with the SENCO, as a key individual within the school environment who was relied upon for support, consultation and the development of CA practice.

"I think leadership is important I think the leadership of CAs, whoever's managing them and whoever is representing them in the wider school environment is really, really, really important" (CA2).

Several participants identified the SENCO as the manager of their work at post-primary level. Within this sample, it is possible to suggest that CAs viewed the SENCO as their key form of supervision with assistants attributing a number of important functions to the SENCO.

"... my boss, the SENCO is somebody that I know, I could quite happily come in, and you have a proper sit down with her and if you have a problem and she's not going to dismiss me offhand, and I feel very comfortable with her and that is a big part of my sense of job satisfaction" (CA7).

SENCO support was also identified as a key element in the professional development of the CA role, influencing the schools' overall approach to the

deployment of assistants. A small number of participants pointed to the impact of SEN leadership on CA working conditions in individual school settings.

“They [SENCO team] are really switched-on clever people. And I think they have figured out if your classroom assistants are well qualified, and, you know, treated well, they're probably going to stay and they're going to be better at the job” (TA2).

A minority of participants also articulated the key role of the SENCO to mediate on issues of role clarity between teacher and assistants. This was seen as pivotal in ensuring professional responsibilities were established.

“There's not really a lot of collaboration with teachers at all in my setting. If we have any queries about what we should do or anything like that, we would just really nip in and have a word with the SENCO. And then she will then liaise with the teachers after” (SNA1).

“Our SENCO is very good, in that, the last time it happened she sent an email that outlined our job description of what we actually do and our rate of pay. She had our back about the disrespect that we were getting about wanting to be with our pupils” (CA8).

For a few participants, SENCO support was reported as enabling CA autonomy, which allowed the assistant to develop individualised supports to pupils and develop their own practice.

“Our head of learning support is very supportive of us and gives us a fairly ... keeps us on a fairly loose rein. I find her really encouraging, she's really good, and that makes a big difference” (CA2).

“The SENCO is actually very open with me. I think she's not the type of person to put you in a box. She lets you sort of develop and find the right approach. I think she is good at using your skills ... to define your potential. She trusts me and she gave me a free hand to intervene. Of course, that doesn't mean that she doesn't ask me or I don't communicate with her ... the SENCO gives me the freedom to try it” (CA5).

CA support was perceived by participants as providing helpful presence and careful proximity, well-intentioned interactions which developed unique supportive relationships with pupils and professional relationships. CA relationships with teachers was broadly conceived as supporting the teachers in the classroom and was highly contextualised to each teacher which reinforced CA perceptions of role ambiguity. CAs particularly identified the importance of their relationship with the SENCO. This theme has presented the varied ways in which CAs understood their roles supporting both pupils and teachers. The following theme will present interpretation of CA perceptions of their preparation and the nature and impact of their paraprofessional role.

5.5 CA Preparation

The overarching theme of ‘CA preparation’ explores the diverse attitudes, perceptions and experiences of preparing their classroom support roles. The first sub-theme of ‘becoming a CA’ captures the varied motivations described by participants for their work as a CA as well as perceptions of the relevance pre-service CA training. A second sub-theme ‘learning in the classroom’ follows which explores CA accounts of school-based and collaborative training with teaching and non-teaching colleagues.

5.5.1 Becoming a CA

Participants provided a diverse array of motivating factors behind their career choice. The reasons for becoming a CA are diverse and personalised to each individual and their socio-economic circumstances. As key members of the workforce, several CAs suggested a desire to contribute to the school community, work alongside teachers and support pupils with SEN and connect with the particular ethos of their setting.

“That sense of being part of the school community and morale... It is lovely to be part of something bigger than yourself, you know, being part of that that wider community. I am proud to be part of the integrated education movement and proud of our school. I am very proud of it.” (TA7).

Others shared pragmatic explanations for their choice of work, stressing the hours and holidays associated with the school setting. For female participants, the CA role complemented other childcare responsibilities.

“ I have three children ... the hours were appealing, so it kind of felt that learning support still allowed me to use my skills and experience in supporting children and young people... that it allowed me to do it on terms which suited me and my family” (LSA1).

A key motivator for a significant number of participants was their aspiration to pursue a career in teaching. Interestingly, a number of participants were newly qualified teachers or teachers who qualified abroad and sought experience in order to enhance further career opportunities in Northern Ireland.

“I was a maths teacher. So when I came to work in Northern Ireland, and I thought that would be a good starting point for me to learn about the reality in the schools of Northern Ireland. And that is why I became a CA” (CA4).

For other participants, working as a CA was discussed as an alternative to teaching. Working as a CA was a fulfilling role for those who through personal circumstances were unable to undertake teacher training. Throughout the interviews, the role of the CA was suggested as a ‘stepping stone’ to initial teacher education (ITE) connecting the CA and Teacher roles.

“I discovered that actually I enjoyed teaching and I knew I couldn’t sort of go into teaching at that stage” (TA7).

“I was thinking about doing my PGCE and stuff... but I stayed because it's a good job to stay in while you are kind of figuring out where you want to go” (TA2).

For several participants, a key motive for becoming a Classroom Assistant was rooted in their desire to support the inclusion of pupils with disabilities. This is suggested as meaningful work by a number of CAs.

“I thought if I could do something just to help those who, many forty years ago wouldn't have been given any help at all or were a neglected part of society really... so that they could achieve everything that they possibly could, with a little bit of encouragement that they might not get otherwise” (CA7).

Several assistants suggested efforts to support the wider social inclusion agenda.

“I kind of thought it is like an activist role as there is such a high proportion of working-class pupils in the schools and a lot of them because they will take that guidance from especially younger members of staff, I would be really reluctant to share my views and really push them towards questioning things and forming their own kind of views. So, it is kind of more than a job really” (CA8).

Finally, a number of participants shared their own personal experiences of disability as a pupil in a mainstream school which they claimed provided the motivation for seeking work as a CA.

“My own background was sort of similar to the sort of students that I assist.... Because I had various support put in place throughout my education... because I had all those supports, I suppose I had a connection or an empathy for people with disabilities ... I enjoyed that interaction with the professionals that was trying to help me” (TA3).

While a significant number of CAs stressed the key motivations for becoming a CA, few identified suitable forms of preparation for this role. It is difficult to infer typical training routes within the diverse responses from assistants, in terms of the level, type, or indeed the necessity of training.

“I would say that qualities would be key before any qualification or anything like that. You don’t know what child you are going to work with, you don’t know their background or their issues or their challenges” (SNA1).

Preparation for the role was suggested by several participants in terms of personal attributes. The ability to build relationships and to communicate with young people and their teachers was a common thread within CA descriptions of the desired qualities for pupil support as important personal requirements for CAs. Academic ability was identified as a necessity for pupil support within the grammar context.

“I think you need to be confident in your own academic ability to a certain extent because the boys need to be able to trust you, that you can support what they're doing, that you actually know the right answers and the content quite well” (CA2).

Several participants explained that although they had undertaken a vocational CA course, they were ambivalent about its relevance to the post-primary sector.

“I think a lot of the course was very primary based and it is difficult then to translate that up to the older pupils and older settings... there wasn’t a huge breadth in it. It sort of reinforced that stereotype of you know you’re there to cut the fruit and to clean the paint brushes and to wipe noses” (CA1).

The next section will extend this understanding by exploring CA experiences of training and professional development for employment as a CA.

5.5.2 Learning in the Classroom

School-based training for CAs was identified as similarly variable. Reading pupil documents and SEN training were cited as the most common and relevant to the post-primary context. Several CAs spoke favourably of training opportunities which enhanced their competence in providing support to pupils.

“I found the training to be very useful, to know how to tackle things and to know how to help him and also with strategies. When you know your pupil and their needs, when you learn more about it through training, it is more useful because then you will know about certain aspects of their condition or behaviour” (CA9).

CA discussion of condition-specific training required for the role excited a diverse range of responses. The views of individual assistants offered a stark contrast.

“There is no onus on having qualifications in terms of disabilities. I don’t know that there are any qualifications that led to the role that are sufficient or any training ... to prepare you or to further develop you within the role” (TA3).

“I decided to do a master's in special needs because I just loved it so much. I wanted to learn more. And then because of the students that I was working with... I got myself I got so emotionally invested in it. I did my dissertation on this disorder because I just wanted to know as much as I could to be able to help” (TA5).

Opportunities to access training were not shared by all assistants with some lamenting limited options within individual settings and a lack of uniformity in availability of training and professional development.

“Training is non-existent.... because there hasn’t been any but there is nothing in the workplace itself.... Definitely more training is needed” (TA3).

“I remember when I first started, the student I was with had dyspraxia and I had no idea what that was and I had to go home and learn about that myself. I wasn’t given any training whatsoever. It’s crazy to think back on, that I was expected to help this student without actually knowing anything about their need or how best to support that. I think the SENCO in the school could have given me information on that or could have at least directed me to the best place to find it like a website or to look at the objectives in the students statement, instead of just going home and googling it” (TA6).

Several participants were uncertain about the implications of SEN qualifications and training on their assistant roles in the classroom; an appreciation of the barriers pupils faced and strategies to overcome them were viewed as central to the support role, however, this was cited as a further area of role ambiguity for CAs.

“...if you have more qualifications, it’s not really a CA job it’s more like a quasi-special education teacher. This is what sometimes we talk about in my team because some of the CAs also have specialist degrees... And what we are saying is that what we are doing, if you are taking it seriously, you are a sort of special education teacher” (CA5).

Furthermore, CAs identified wider limitations within their experiences of training which point to a range of problems inherent in paraprofessional training.

“Any training that we have done in school, we have not actually been allowed to use or take any further. The problem was how can I go on and deliver it to the child when there are very specific hours in which you have to work with your stage 5 pupil and there’s no time within the school day for you to do that” (TA4).

“There is certainly training available, but ... I think it is so standalone, you know, you go and you do a morning on an introduction to ASD or a day on dyslexia... I don’t think there is enough sort of longer-term professional development for classroom assistants, it’s very much standalone things ...you know, you do a couple of hours and you’re ready to do the job” (CA1).

Moreover, a further area of disparity was evident in CA attitudes to collaborative training with teachers. CA perspectives suggested a lack of consensus about the suitability and relevance of joint training alongside teachers. For several assistants it was common practice to attend training with their teaching colleagues, while others expressed less positive views on the practice, availability and impact of collaborative training.

“In my experience, a lot of teachers won’t have done any of those courses and that creates a problem when the teacher kind of stands back in their lesson and lets the CA teach the student that is the weakest in the class and has the most needs when that is not what is supposed to happen. I think that is because some of the teachers aren’t actually trained in how to support students with complex needs as they haven’t done any courses.” (TA6).

“I think there should be a lot more joint learning between teachers and CAs. Although some people may have doubts about that, because, you know, some people are better educated than others. At the end of the day, everyone is still working with the same pupils and the same environment. If everyone was on board with the same training, I feel like it would have massive benefits ... maybe it would allow that more mutual understanding between staff”
(SNA1).

Several assistants identified the ‘CA team’ as the most relevant source of informal ‘*on the job*’ training. Descriptions were often centred on shadowing as a form of induction training for CAs, with an emphasis placed on informal dissemination of best practice.

“Definitely preparation comes from seeing how others practice and trying to find your own way of doing it. I really feel that you learn best from your colleagues. I think work experience is the best. I really think that new CAs should be paired up with more experienced staff” (CA8).

The staffroom was identified as a key source of support for CAs, providing informal access to information and experience as well as emotional support among assistants.

“We had time for all of us gather together and had a chat with the SENCO and we had time to do in house discussions about how we do things, how are we doing, what are the challenges? I'm not talking about any official training, but we could share our joys, our tough moments, our worries, and, you know, ... recent years have proven more difficult. The situation has changed that you are there for less time, there's so many things to do. We

don't really have time, we don't really have... we do have training but it's not enough I would say. We don't really have time for, for us to talk about our challenges” (TA9).

This theme has presented the CA varied experiences and perceptions of preparation and training for their roles supporting both pupils and teachers. The following theme will present interpretation of CAs perceptions and experiences of work as paraprofessionals within the education workforce.

5.6 Classroom Assistants as Paraprofessionals

“I just find that disappointing that actually it could be really good to have that group of people doing the job because it's does undoubtedly make a difference to those pupils that we support and it shapes them in a way that certainly wouldn't happen without CAs, but it is expected to be done as low skilled, minimum wage, with no great amount of training or professional development” (CA1).

The final theme of ‘CAs as paraprofessionals’ organises CAs characterisations of the occupational dimensions of their role in post-primary schools. CA discussion was focused on three interrelated sub-themes of ‘the status of CAs’, ‘renumeration for CAs’ and ‘career progression’.

5.6.1 The Status of CAs

“The big thing would be the respect from staff or the children. There are times when our team would sit down as a team and discuss how we have no respect from a lot of staff and no respect from the children. You feel... it is

really horrible and can really negatively impact your mental well-being in the workplace. Because you feel like you are in an endless battle if a child disrespects you and you bring it to a member of staff. They're not going to take it seriously because they don't respect you because you're maybe not as ... (pause) qualified as they are” (SNA1).

A significant number of participants offered unfavourable constructions of their professional status and respect as negative aspects of the CA role. A significant number of CAs spoke of feeling ‘undervalued’, ‘unimportant’ and ‘second class in some ways’. Feeling respected and supported in their role was a key issue for assistants. One CA spoke of the importance of being well treated by teaching staff.

“Being well treated by the teachers is another thing and I think that's something that is done particularly well where I work... the teachers have a lot of respect for the CAs where I work. Yea, the teachers would have an awful lot of respect I would say. From that perspective, it's a really healthy environment to work so that is also important” (CA2).

However, the majority of participants reported less positive characterisations of the respect afforded to assistants by teachers. A recurrent characterisations was the experience of ‘being treated like a child’.

“The worst thing was not being seen as a person, you know, being treated... like a student and shouted at for my students ... about their behaviour...” (TA5).

“You know at different times, maybe you haven't felt so much valued particularly maybe if you cannot get access to things that you would want

like technology to help the child. You sort of feel that you're being treated more like a pupil than a professional" (TA7).

Interestingly, perceptions of a lack of respect and appreciation for the CA role was also attributed to pupils and parents. The behaviour of pupils was offered as evidence of the lack of respect and authority by a significant number of assistants.

"I think the students see that you are running to tell tales on them, like a child instead of being able to dish out the consequences yourself and become a member of staff that the students will actually respect" (TA6).

One participant detailed her efforts to develop the trust of parents.

"I had a new pupil and the parents; I don't think that they trusted me. Just ... they didn't. I don't know, I am not sure why. And it took me a long time until I built up credentials with them until they realized that actually we can collaborate.... I think parents ultimately have an ambivalence to classroom assistant support, they want it, but they are not happy that they need it" (CA5).

Negative experiences also extended to perceptions that the role as unskilled with small number of assistants describing their feelings of being 'under-utilised'.

"It is frustrating too that sometimes we are not able to use our full skills.... For example, in our team we have CAs with qualifications in behaviour management, speech and language specialist... basically we have people with loads of different relevant skills, and they feel that they are not utilised, and I think there is a feeling of being devalued that comes with that" (TA5).

5.6.2 Remuneration for CAs

Closely associated with status, pay was emphasised as an important issue. The majority of participants described remuneration as a key difficulty, with some requiring alternative employment to supplement their income.

“And as brutal as it sounds, fundamentally the financial impact as well. It just doesn't pay enough to survive as your as your primary job” (CA1).

“ The salary is ... to be honest it is ridiculous. I have no problem saying it, my salary next year for ten months is literally less than £12,000 There is no satisfaction in terms of the salary, it just about gets me by. I have colleagues who have been CAs for years ... I am simply wondering and trying to work it out; how are you surviving with it? Like how you can survive on it?” (TA3).

For others, pay was portrayed as a financial hardship.

“It's not financially viable, you cannot buy a house on our wages, you can't we can feed your family on our wages. I am working in a school and my children are on free school meals with the rest of the kids at the school. My kids are in the same position. You are working in a school, and you are not even earning enough to not be on benefits” (TA4).

5.6.3 Career Progression

A final sub-theme captures CA discussion of the general conditions of employment and career progression opportunities for assistants. Job insecurity and limited

opportunities for career progression were expressed by a significant number of assistants as the most difficult aspects of the role.

“There's no career progression for teaching assistants. Even after six, seven years of work. I don't want to give it up, I absolutely adore working in school, love the kids, love my role. But it's not a career, it's not valued. It's not paid properly. And there's nowhere to move to, you're just stuck” (TA4).

“You feel like you are a CA and that is all you are, you are not going to move up into a higher position. If you do have training in other areas, it's kind of like what is the point in putting yourself forward because you cannot progress, and you cannot get any extra pay” (CA1).

Interestingly, general perceptions of high levels of job satisfaction with the nature of the role and the range of duties undertaken were contrasted with the negative aspects of employment as a CA. Job insecurity was highlighted by a small number of CAs as a particular concern.

“I don't think that works for CAs in terms of, you know, the current stateminting process. If you're doing your job, well, you should effectively be making yourself unemployed. But why would you do that? Why would you create support and independence so much that you do yourself out of the job? You know, the sense of you are employed for as long as pupil is at the school, there then becomes this big scramble for everybody to get a year 8 pupil because you're pretty much guaranteed a job, you know, for five years” (LSA1).

Such conditions were perceived as contributing to a high turnover of support staff.

“You have to take those little victories and the little sense of achievement because actually there isn't anything bigger. There is only so long that you can kind of ... I think that there comes a point where you just keep saying to yourself ‘I can’t keep doing this, putting myself through it and fighting and battling all the time for actually very little in return” (CA1).

Finally, a minority of CAs reflected on the need for systemic change and reform to CA role in the local context.

“With a bit of flexibility, it might be good to let people specialise in subject areas so that teachers aren't then having to try and teach a CA first, who then takes that information to try and help a pupil” (CA4).

“There are strengths here in some of the ways that things are done, but personally speaking, I just think there's so much more that could be done... we could do things differently and it might be better. You know, it's that attitude that ... it's sort of, well, we've always done it this way.... I think it's great that actually that classroom assistants are being given a voice or even that there is this research being done because for so long, it just feels like you're there in the background, just sort of getting on with it, but without any real support or resources or voice or anything. I think anything that does raise our profile can only be a good thing” (CA1).

5.7 Conclusion

‘CA Support at Post-Primary’ presents the broad and ambiguous ways in which assistants in post-primary schools characterised the nature of their work within the post-primary phase. This broad conceptualisation included varied

perspectives on the multi-faceted nature of classroom support meeting the needs of all pupils, across the curriculum in ways perceived to be devised by individual CAs. 'CA Practice' at post-primary level was conceptualised through spatial and relational discourse by CAs through varying levels of proximity, interactions and relationships with teachers and pupils.

The theme of 'CA Preparation' detailed the varied motivations for becoming a CA as well as the wide range of attitudes, perceptions and experience of professional learning activities for the classroom support role. The final theme of 'CAs as Paraprofessionals' explored the mainly negative experiences related to CA status, remuneration and career development. The collective findings of the quantitative and qualitative phases will be synthesised in a discussion of the findings in the context of the Northern Irish education system, drawing comparisons with previous international and regional literature.

Chapter Six: Discussion

6.0 Chapter Outline

This chapter presents a discussion of the key findings of doctoral study, linking the quantitative and qualitative results reported in chapters four and five in an informative synthesis which critically considers the experiences and perspectives of CAs within the current SEN context in NI. The chapter seeks to illuminate the CA perspective at the heart of classroom practice within the post-primary phase of education, providing an experiential voice and insight which is currently absent regionally, in both research and policy literature. In doing so, the thesis seeks to provide a significant contribution to knowledge and discourse within the Northern Ireland context.

The aim of the research was *to investigate the experiences and perceptions of CAs employed in post-primary schools to support pupils with SEN in Northern Ireland*. This was addressed through four research questions:

1. How do CAs describe and characterise their classroom support role in post-primary settings?
2. How do CAs prepare for their role in post-primary settings?
3. What are CA perceptions of their conditions of employment as paraprofessionals within the educational workforce?
4. What does this research tell us about the contribution of CAs in supporting pupils with statements of SEN in post-primary settings?

The discussion is structured around three over-arching themes: ‘A system under strain’; ‘The evolving role of CAs’, and ‘Membership of the education community’, which collectively provide a nuanced consideration of key findings.

6.1 A System Under Strain

This study has been undertaken at a critical juncture for SEN policy and practice in Northern Ireland, the outworkings of which have undoubtedly impacted on the educational experiences of pupils with SEN, their parents and carers, and the practitioners who support them. The situation has been further exacerbated by the disruption of COVID-19 and associated closure of schools over the 2020-21 academic year (NI Executive, 2020; NCB 2021; Purdy, 2021). While these issues do not relate explicitly to the work of CAs in post-primary classrooms, this context, nonetheless, created a complex backdrop and reinforced the imperative for attention on, and insight into, those working closely to support pupils with SEN.

6.1.1 The Prevalence of SEN in NI Classrooms

As previously outlined in the literature review (Section 2.1), the prevalence of SEN in NI is a significant concern in both policy and practice. NI has the highest SEN prevalence rates in the UK (O’Connor et al., 2021; McConkey, 2022), with increases in both primary (16%) and post-primary (26%) sectors (O’Connor et al., 2021, 15). In 2021/22, 15.5% of pupils in post-primary schools (23,586) were placed on the SEN register; of this proportion, over a third (n=8021; 34%) had a statement of special educational need (NISRA, 2022, 9). In particular, there is interest in the prevalence of autism in the school age population, which has increased by 213% from 1.5% of the school population in 2010/2011 to 4.7% in 2021/22 (DOH, 2022, 8). Despite changes in SEN recording procedures which repositioned autism from

the SEN register to the medical register (O’Conner et al., 2021), in 2021/22 87% of autistic pupils had SEN, with over half (58%) having a statement of SEN (DOH, 2022, 11). While it is currently not known how prevalent CA support features in the special educational provision for autistic pupils, the findings of this research appear to suggest that CAs are commonly supporting the day-to-day school experience of this group of pupils.

In addition, provision for pupils with SEN without a statement is a growing concern (NICCY 2020; NI Assembly 2021). Due to information management deficiencies, there is currently an ‘alarming gap’ in understanding the number of pupils without statements who require SEN support and the scale of unmet needs at classroom level (NICCY, 2020). Successive policy reviews have highlighted the limited capacity of early intervention services for pupils at stage three of the current Code of Practice (NI Assembly 2021). EA Pupil Support Services are critiqued as offering a predominately advisory input, operating on a limited evidence base and the critical absence of monitoring or review (NICCY, 2020).

Early intervention is a core principle of the revised Code of Practice (DE, 2022) with recognition across wider educational and social policies of the need for the timely intervention of supports as a focused, early and sustained help for pupils experiencing educational inequalities (NI Executive, 2020; Purdy et al., 2021a; DfE, 2022). Arguably, as demonstrated within these findings, CAs reported experiences of providing an informal front-line support at post-primary which may be contributing a basic level of support for non-statemented SEN pupils. Moreover, it could be suggested that the CA workforce offers insight into the needs of these pupils in the absence of rigorous monitoring at classroom level.

It is also important to note that throughout this period, ETI inspections of SEN provision and practice have been limited due to action short of industrial action (ETI, 2019). This has led to the assertion that in the absence of full evaluation, there is no evidence that schools are applying a clear and consistent approach to the support for pupils with SEN (NI Assembly, 2021). The partial nature of inspections has curtailed the extent to which SEN provision, specifically the deployment and support of CAs, can be fully observed, with potential implications for the rights of pupils to equitable educational experiences and effective individualised support (UNCRC, 1989; UNCRPD 2006; NICCY, 2020). It has been suggested that effective educational inclusion in NI has been constrained by the ambiguous interpretations of the CA role (O'Connor and Hansson, 2012). Crucially, the *United Nations Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report on UNCRC for the UK* (United Nations, 2016) recommends the adoption of a rights-based approach to disability in education which includes a comprehensive strategy for inclusion through co-ordinated legislation, policy and programmes.

A key issue underpinning the findings of this doctoral study is the deployment model for CAs within the post-primary sector in NI. CAs deployment and employment continues to be based on the allocation of CA hours to individualised pupils with statements of SEN. As a regional deployment model, this has not been revised since the initial Code of Practice (DE, 1998) and thus can be viewed in line with earlier iterations of integrative provision, rather than a framework of inclusive education with equal access to equitable supports. Underpinning this discussion is a critical consideration of the ways in which SEN policy and practice could be reformed to create a more efficient and effective system of support for all pupils at post-primary level. As such, the deployment model for

classroom support has not kept pace with developments in inclusive practice, exemplified in other jurisdictions. Notably, in the Republic of Ireland, where the review of the SNA scheme has led to the concept of ‘frontloading’ of additional supports (NCSE, 2018). Frontloading is based on the premise that within the continuum of support framework there is a need to allocate supports in advance to allow schools to respond to the existing and emerging needs of pupils as an inclusive approach (ibid). Undoubtedly, the profile of the pupil population attending mainstream schools, and particularly at post-primary level, is changing. To date, SEN policy has placed a limited focus on the deployment of assistants, with a need to urgently examine regional deployment models.

6.1.2 Parental Preference for, and access to CA Support

Increasing pupil diversity in NI has undoubtedly contributed to a corresponding request for additional support in school, with suggestions of school leader and parental preference for dedicated CA input (BELB, 2007; NEELB, 2011; NICCY 2020). For non-statemented SEN pupils, the cost of provision is met by individual schools, fuelling parental engagement with the statutory assessment as a means to secure additional classroom resources for pupils with SEN (NICCY, 2020). This has become a pressing policy concern and reveals a tension at the heart of the statutory assessment process, with parents and practitioners seeing this procedure as a gateway to resources and funding for SEN support, with an undue focus on the specified allocation of CA hours in a statutory statement (NIAO, 2020).

Wider parental dissatisfaction with the SEN process is well documented (O'Connor et al., 2005; O'Connor 2007; NICCY, 2020; DfE, 2022). Specific policy challenges include the protracted nature of statutory assessment procedures; severely limited access to educational psychology and early intervention services (NICCY, 2020; NIAO, 2020). Inevitably, this has led to a surge in parental complaint, increased demand for the informal mediation service (DARS) and a threefold increase in parental appeals to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST) in 2019/2020 (NIAO, 2020) with alarm expressed at the number of appeals found in favour of the parents and carers conceded by EA (NI Assembly, 2021).

Broadly, this may suggest that regional SEN provision is inextricably bound with, and reliant upon, the provision of CA support, although this may not be in line with inclusive practice (Giangreco, 2021). Zhao et al., (2021) observe parental

perceptions of SNA support in the Republic of Ireland as offering a sense of security, associated with the view that pupils are included better when support staff are present. This has been a longstanding issue; for example, previous guidance drafted by ELBs sought to address *‘the perception of parents, principals and teachers that allocation of a SEN classroom assistant is a prerequisite for entry of a statemented pupil into a mainstream school’* (BELB, 2007, 2). However, the concept of CA hours continues to hold significance, with direct implications for the educational experience of pupils. This was made explicit by school leader contributions to NICCY ‘Too little, too late’ report (2020) with the assertion that *“if a child’s classroom assistant hours are reduced, then they may have ‘no option, for the sake of the rest of the class, but to reduce a child’s hours at school’* (NICCY, 2020, 79).

The intrinsic expectation of the allocation of CA hours as an outcome of statutory assessment is pervasive, and crucially, in the local context, perceived to be central to the day-to-day experience of educational inclusion for pupils with SEN. Critically, however, when considering the growing prevalence rates, the scale of delays reported, the level of unmet needs of pupils, and the disruption to pupils’ educational experiences caused by the pandemic, there is little evidence to suggest that access to CA support will provide sufficient remediation, or indeed, provide the best option for educational inclusion. Indeed, in this vein, Giangreco (2021) characterises assistant support as an example of Maslow’s Hammer.

“In inclusive educational contexts often, TAs are the hammer – an effective tool well-matched to certain functions, yet not suited to others. In schools where TAs are treated as Maslow’s Hammer, they are the primary, sometimes nearly the exclusive, tool to educationally and socially include students with certain disabilities... Maslow’s Hammer is also found in the

justification based decision-making approaches... since they tend to restrict outcomes to the assignment of a) a full-time TA, b) a shared TA or c) no TA” (Giangreco, 2021, 281).

The concurrent regional reviews of SEN present an opportunity for regional policy-makers and school leaders to re-conceptualise what additional support in the post-primary classroom might look like in line with teacher, CA, parental and pupil perspectives.

6.1.3 Funding CA Support

Sustainable SEN funding is a mounting concern for policymakers and school leaders. As noted previously, (Section 1.1.5) there is apprehension about the exponential growth in expenditure on SEN, fuelled, in part, by perceptions that is under-resourced, unsustainable and insufficient to meet the needs of pupils (NIAO 2017; 2020). And yet, repeated reviews of SEN operations (ETI, 2019, NI Assembly, 2021) have concluded that current funding models for SEN do not represent value for money in terms of economy, efficiency, or effectiveness in mainstream schools (NIAO, 2020). In 2019/20, SEN expenditure had grown to £311 million, in the mainstream sector this included £76 million on CA support, £24 million on EA Pupil Support Services and £17 million on learning support centres in schools (NIAO, 2020). To date, there are concerns relating to inconsistencies relating to SEN expenditure (NIAO, 2020), the lack of monitoring of expenditure and the insufficient evidence base to assess value for money and sustainability within SEN operations (NI Assembly, 2021). It is hoped that this will be addressed by the ongoing independent reviews of Education and of SEN (DE, 2022a).

Moreover, on a regional scale, it is suggested that the NI education budget is insufficient to meet the growing pressures on schools, with evidence of large funding gaps (House of Commons, 2019; ETI, 2019; NICCY, 2020). The education budget for the coming academic year (2022/23) faces a predicted £204.5 million funding deficit (NI Assembly, 2022) with the resourcing of SEN provision acknowledged as a particular area of concern. In relation to CA support, in 2019-20, this accounted for approximately a quarter (24.4%) of overall SEN expenditure (NIAO, 2020), a level that has undoubtedly risen given the sustained expansion of this workforce by 7.5% in the 2020/2021 academic year (section 1.1.5). For example, in May 2022, one post-primary school within the research sample posted a job advertisement seeking to fill 51 CA posts in preparation for the 2022/23 academic year.¹³ There is therefore an imperative to critically review and assess the allocation of CA support in terms of the profile of the CA workforce, their roles and duties in inclusive classrooms as well as their contribution to education for pupils with SEN.

Similar financial concerns are evident in other jurisdictions (Webster, 2022; DfE, 2022; TES, 2022¹⁴). The recent DfE review (DfE, 2022) of the SEND framework in England identified unsustainable funding patterns that led to comparable challenges including poorer outcomes for children and young people with SEN and parental dissatisfaction with the SEN framework.

“...challenges are driven by a vicious cycle of late intervention, low confidence from parents and providers and ineffective recourse allocation which is driving the spiralling costs in the system. This cycle begins in early years and mainstream schools where, despite the best endeavours of the

¹³ <https://eani.taleo.net/careersection/external/jobdetail.ftl>

workforce, settings are frequently ill-equipped to identify and effectively support children and young people's needs” (DfE, 2022, 12).

Policy proposals to address this cycle have sought to develop a more effective and sustainable SEN framework in which additional support is more accessible, specialised and consistent through the establishment of a standards-based national SEND and alternative provision system, comprising a revised code of practice, a digitised statutory assessment process and streamlined appeals procedure (DfE, 2022). The accompanying Green Paper (DfE, 2022b) outlines a vision for improved provision benefiting from additional funding, teacher training and professional development, an evidence-based programme, and a National Professional Qualification for SENCOs. Crucially, standards for TAs are included within the proposed changes.

“Teaching assistants play a key role in supporting children and young people with SEND to access learning in the classroom. We will set out clear guidance on the effective use and deployment of teaching assistants to support children and young people with SEND as part of the national standards” (DfE, 2022, 47).

6.1.4 SEN Policy Review and Reform

Within the NI context, the pace of SEN policy reform has been slow, with governmental reports indicating that none of the NIAO (2017) recommendations have been fully implemented (NI Assembly, 2021) and other evidence suggesting that progress has deteriorated over the pandemic period (NCB, 2021). At present, the revised Code of Practice (DE, 2022) is not yet fully in operation, with consultation on its content and the associated SENDA regulations still in progress, resulting in

piecemeal implementation of the new framework. Moreover, at the time of writing, NI is facing another episode of political impasse following the May 2022 Stormont Assembly Elections, generating fresh concerns about the pace of educational funding and SEN provision (NI Assembly, 2022).

The response to this uneven policy situation suggests some desire to re-design the current system. Firstly, there has been an initiation of three separate reviews with a focus on SEN policy and practice. At present, it is not clear the extent to which these reviews will produce a coherent and robust set of recommendations and policy priorities for future SEN reform, including a much-needed CA policy. An Independent Review of Education in NI commissioned by the New Decade New Approach (NDNA) (2020) agreement, is currently underway led by Sir Keir Bloomer (Independent Review of Education, 2021). While the focus of this review is the establishment of a more sustainable education system, a key element of strand one examines the educational journey, outcomes, and experience of pupils with SEN and disabilities. Strand two will review the current level, quality, and consistency of provision within pupil support services for SEN. The review commenced in September 2021, with the findings expected in September 2023.

Additionally, a second review (Review V – Workload Associated with Special Educational Needs (SEN) Provision) by the EA, DE and Teaching Unions has examined teacher workload relative to statutory SEN provision, the roles of schools, school leaders and SENCOs (DE, 2021). The review is expected to conclude in September 2022. The deployment of CAs and collaboration with subject teachers has not been identified as an explicit issue for examination, but it is hoped that the role of CAs will be considered as a factor within teacher workload in SEN.

Following the NIAO review of SEN provision (NIAO 2017; 2020), the Public Accounts Committee commissioned an independent review of SEN (NI Assembly, 2021), aiming to ‘understand whether SEN provision and processes are fit for purpose in terms of progress made by children, impact on children’s outcomes and whether services can be delivered more effectively and efficiently’ (NI Assembly, 2021). Critically, the role of the CA workforce is a feature of this review, and it is anticipated that findings may offer insights into current deployment practices as well as suggestions for an alternative framework of support at school level. The review, undertaken over a six-month period, is expected to deliver recommendations to improve SEN policy and practice later in 2022 (Meredith, 2022).

Furthermore, DE and EA have outlined a Strategic Area Plan for Special Education Provision (EA, 2022) covering the period 2022 to 2027, which focuses on enhancing the level of specialist provision for SEN within mainstream schools. The proposed model is flexibly designed to build capacity through specialist small group teaching and higher levels of in-class support. Crucially, specialist provision is envisioned as staffed by a teacher and the provision of ‘full-time classroom assistant(s)’ with the EA assuming responsibility for funding and resourcing, training staff and monitoring provision (EA, 2022).

Amid this challenging context, it is easy to lose sight of the practitioners at the centre of classroom practice and the pupils that they serve. CAs continue to provide daily support to pupils in difficult circumstances. It is therefore essential that their voices contribute to understanding the nature of SEN support. Abbott et al., (2011) note that in times of resource scarcity there is a critical imperative to ensure that support staff are deployed most effectively, foregrounding the need for attention

on the CA workforce and their work within inclusive classrooms. For growing numbers of pupils with SEN in post-primary settings, the provision of CA hours is integral to their inclusion, participation, and achievement in mainstream schools. It is at this juncture, that the research seeks to discuss the finding of research which aims to give voice to CAs within this strained system. The following section provides a discussion of the evolving CA role in post-primary schools in NI.

6.2 The Evolving Role of CAs

This theme discusses the evolving role of classroom assistants employed to support pupils with SEN in post-primary schools. CA descriptions and characterisations of their roles will be considered in relation to the ongoing review and reform of SEN in NI through three interrelated sub-themes:

- CA Role: Key Domains of Support
- CA Role: Key Characteristics
- CA Role: Reconfiguration

6.2.1 CA Role: Key Domains of Support

The quantitative and qualitative findings of this research found that the CA role in post-primary settings was highly adaptive to individual pupils and their classroom contexts. The findings demonstrate the growing scope of the CA role, across four domains of support (learning; pastoral; social and behaviour) that represent the everyday facets of their work.

In this study, CAs placed significant emphasis on the reported breadth of support they provided for pupils. Throughout the interviews, participants wove

together the learning, organisational, pastoral, social, and behavioural domains stressing a hybrid interpretation of classroom learning and bespoke support for pupils. Such insights resonate with the findings of previous regional and international studies which have identified the evolving complexity of the CA role straddling both the academic and pastoral responsibilities (Abbott et al, 2011; Monfore et al., 2015, Sharma and Salend, 2016; Webster and Blatchford, 2019; Clarke, 2021).

6.2.1.1 Learning Support

A core facet of the study findings related to CA perceptions of their support for teaching and learning. This finding intersects with the unresolved debate on the emerging quasi-pedagogical role of CAs and the tensions this can create (Webster et al., 2011; Chambers, 2015; Sharma and Salend, 2016; Webster and Blatchford, 2018; Zhao et al., 2021). As the first regional study to elicit the views of post-primary CAs as practitioners on this contested aspect of the role, the inherent challenges identified merit exploration. For the majority of these CAs, learning support indicated a high level of direct engagement in instructional support for pupils as evidenced in other studies (Blatchford et al., 2012; Gibson et al., 2015; Webster and Blatchford, 2019; Clarke, 2021a). It was most commonly described as assisting subject teachers, motivating pupil participation, offering additional verbal instructions, as well as providing alternative explanations and differentiation of pupil resources.

In the NI context, the recurrent problem associated with the reported CA perceptions is that, while they reflect the ascribed remit for assistants within the current EA job description, namely ‘to assist with the educational support and care of

pupil(s)' (appendix two), the ambiguity of terminology lacks accurate specification of the exact nature and extent of additional learning support. The absence of interrogation of this domain of CA support and the corresponding experience of pupils at post-primary level in NI represent a critical omission that should be acknowledged and given particular consideration in the context of the SEN review and the framework revision.

In this domain, further qualitative findings highlighted lack of consensus within CA conceptualisations of their learning support roles. Two opposing perspectives were of particular note in this study. Firstly, for a small number of CAs, learning support was clearly understood as supplementary to the subject teacher, with an emphasis on facilitating support of classroom activities. These descriptions evidenced on a narrow range of duties, a focus on pupil interaction with the subject teacher and perceptions of clear boundaries with teachers. This interpretation broadly reflects the prescribed remit and function of support role promoted in a limited non-instructional role (Blatchford et al., 2012; Sharma and Salend, 2016). Furthermore, a small number of CAs acknowledged the limitations of their instructional support in terms of their pedagogical and subject knowledge, as well as the ability to support only a small number of pupils at a given time. Other studies (Devecchi and Rouse, 2010; Lehane, 2015) have shown similar findings which highlight the importance of teacher-assistant collaboration as the basis of effective pupil support within inclusive classrooms. This has significant implications given the breadth and depth of the curriculum at post-primary level.

An alternative perspective expressed by a significant number of CAs, including those who had trained as teachers, indicated a higher level of involvement in the learning of individual children. Learning support, as quite distinct from whole

class teaching, was characterised as an intuitive act, highly personalised to individual children and adapting classroom conditions to best meet their learning needs and requirements. As highlighted in the literature, the appropriateness of an informal pedagogical role for assistants continues to be debated (Blatchford et al., 2012; Webster, 2022) not least due to a lack of training, limited supervision and low remuneration (Sharma and Salend, 2016; Giangreco, 2021). Moreover, inappropriate deployment of CAs, particularly in a pedagogical role, is associated with a range of inadvertent and detrimental effects on pupil academic outcomes and educational experiences. Most recently, this has been characterised by Webster (2022) as a structural form of exclusion which situates pupils with SEN in a position in which they receive a lower quality pedagogical diet (Webster et al., 2018; Webster 2022).

“The large and small degrees of marginalisation and the lower-quality pedagogical diet that have been found to have a detrimental effect on learning outcomes are the real-world effects of an under-theorised, unchecked and uncritical drift over time towards a model of inclusion that relies almost exclusively on the employment and deployment of TAs.... the decisions made about TAs – and not the decisions made by TAs – which best explain both the lower-quality pedagogical diet and the results on pupils’ academic progress” (Webster, 2022, 79).

6.2.1.2 Pastoral and Social Support

A further domain revealed the importance of pastoral and social support of pupils with SEN in post-primary settings. These elements are often combined within research which interrogates CA discourses of care in special and inclusive classrooms (Mackenzie, 2011). Overall, the findings of this study indicated that CAs

made a contribution to pupil emotional wellbeing and social inclusion, with awareness of a balanced input, relative to the social implications of support and potential pupil dependence. A significant theme identified in the qualitative data was the importance of positive relationships with pupils. Previous studies have indicated that CA support can have both positive and negative impacts on the inclusion of pupils with SEN within mainstream schools (Mortier et al., 2011). Use of personal relationships by CAs to support key outcomes for pupils, such as independence, behaviour, engagement and participation in learning activities at post-primary level has been highlighted in other literature (Conboy, 2021). In particular, studies which elicit the voice of pupils mirror this theme. Pinkard's (2021) qualitative study of primary aged pupils' views highlighted their experiences of the wide-ranging pastoral and social benefits of TA support, with large majority reporting positive pastoral outcomes including independence, greater participation, motivation and coping strategies. Pinkard concluded:

“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” (Pinkard, 2021, 261).

6.2.1.3 Behavioural Support

This study found that CAs perceived their pupil support roles to have a behavioural dimension in post-primary schools. In both quantitative and qualitative data, CAs identified support for pupil behavioural needs as the most challenging aspect of their role. This finding is consistent with previous international research which identifies CA behavioural support as an area of ambiguity, with a lack of consensus on the extent to which they should be involved in pupil discipline or behaviour

management, particularly in the post-primary context. For example, Howard and Ford (2007) found that half of the TAs in their study were expected to undertake behaviour management for pupils with SEN. Findings highlighted varied assistants' responses on the nature of their involvement in behaviour support relative to their primary learning support roles, leading to contradictory perceptions: *'teachers leave it up to me to manage her'*, with another TA who lacking knowledge and experience in this area has *'no idea what to do and I have often felt threatened by students, physically and verbally'* (ibid, 32). Gibson et al., (2015) found behaviour management duties were a similarly divisive issue, suggesting that they may be allocated to TAs on a reactive basis as *'TA roles are manipulated to address different issues that arise in supporting these students'* (ibid, 83) within concerning implications of both pupils receiving support and for TAs.

This domain of the CA support roles is significant due to the observations that pupils with SEN are more likely to be suspended or expelled than pupils without SEN (NICCY, 2020). This assessment is bore out in recent data (NISRA, 2022; 2022a) which shows that in 2020/21 although pupils with SEN made up 17.3% of the population in NI, they accounted for 35.8% of suspensions, demonstrating that they were twice as likely to be suspended from school. In terms of expulsions, in 2021/22, 25 post-primary pupils were expelled from NI schools. Of this total 12 were pupils with SEN (48% of expulsions). Such data further demonstrates that proportionally pupils with SEN are approximately three times more likely to be expelled than their peers.

In their review of SEN, NICCY (2020) highlighted the vulnerability of SEN pupils to both formal exclusion through suspension and expulsion, and informal exclusions, typically the use of reduced school timetables and informal suspensions.

Stakeholders in this review identified the lack of knowledge, skill and capacity at classroom and local authority level to make adequate provision for pupils with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties and those requiring behavioural supports as contributing to such practices, recommending an urgent review of policy, practice and guidance on school exclusions in addition to greater responsibility on the Board of Governors, the EA and ETI to review such practices.

While research attention has begun to unpack the behavioural elements of assistant roles (Clarke 2021, Blatchford and Griffith, 2021), this has largely focused on the primary school setting and the behavioural needs of younger pupils. The current research, in alignment with other international studies has raised questions about emerging behavioural roles of CAs in post-primary schools, principally in relation to pupils requiring behavioural supports. It is evident that this is an area which requires further research and policy attention in order to ensure that the needs of pupils with behavioural difficulties are adequately addressed.

The description of the multi-faceted nature of CA support provides an important insight into the CA role from the practitioner's perspective. The broad and ambiguous conceptualisation of the CA role emphasised the interconnectedness across the domains of support. The next section will focus on CA characterisations of their roles at post-primary level.

6.2.2 CA Role: Key Characterisations

The views of CAs across the qualitative and quantitative data sets suggested an overall positive perception of making a key contribution to the educational experience of pupils with SEN at post-primary level. Key characterisations of their

evolving role merit consideration: its multi-faceted nature; its reliance on improvisation and its liminal quality.

6.2.2.1 A Multi-Faceted Role

The qualitative exploration of CA experiences at post-primary level revealed its expansive, multi-faceted and fluid nature. From the practitioner's perspective, post-primary classroom support was broadly characterised as holistic, flexible and changeable, adapting in response to the immediate needs of teachers and pupils on a daily, or lesson-by-lesson basis. For most CAs in this sample, the role was a conflation of both general and specialised support, shaped by the increasing complexity and diversity of pupils' needs.

This finding agrees with previous research which evidences the shifting nature of classroom support for pupils with statements of SEN (O'Connor and Hansson, 2012; Warhurst et al., 2014; Sharma and Salend, 2016) and the increasing significance of the work undertaken by this workforce (Watson et al., 2013; Lehane, 2016; Bennett et al., 2021; Lee, 2021).

Moreover, the findings presented in this study echo previous research which characterised the roles of CAs as beset with 'contradictions, tensions and ambiguities' (O'Connor and Hansson, 2012, 32) which are increasingly recognised within the nebulous concept of assistant support and the consequent mismatch between loosely defined roles and the daily reality of practice in the complex context of SEN in mainstream settings (Butt and Lance, 2009; Keating and O'Connor, 2012; Webster and Blatchford, 2018; Skipp and Hopwood, 2019; Lee, 2021). The explanation for this situation is not linear and has emerged as a result of several influences, both internationally and within the NI education system. Undoubtedly,

the historical legacy of a role (Section 2.3) that has not been fully reviewed in any depth, despite developments within SEN policy and legislation has resulted in ambiguity in practice and the long-term impact of these shortfalls are now clearly manifest in mainstream schools. (Abbott et al., 2011; O'Connor and Hansson, 2012; Basford et al, 2017).

Such tensions relate to some of the unresolved issues within special and inclusive education and demonstrate the need for further development of this area of educational policy, specifically, practical guidance to support CAs and teachers in the classroom. The absence of guidance for CAs within the regional SEN policy context remains a conspicuous oversight. Current guidance on the work of CAs is primarily for use by school leaders and teacher with CA management duties (DE, 2011). For example, the Code of Practice (DE, 1998) and subsequent revision (DE, 2022), were largely silent on the allocation and provision of CA support, necessitating both the ELBs and individual schools to formulate institutional policies on 'the use of adult assistants' which defined the parameters of CA classroom practice, to '*avoid situations where the assistant may inadvertently operate outside their remit*' (BELB, 2007, NEELB, 2011, 3). Such policies are limited in offering specific guidance for CAs. In addition to guidance for CA, the findings of this research similarly highlight CA perceptions of limited training and professional development for the CA role.

6.2.2.2 An Improvisational Role

A further notable finding was a shared positive perception of the autonomy afforded to CAs to develop and deliver the different facets of their role. Such a characterisation, encapsulated within the sub-theme 'making it up as we go' provides

a striking contrast with the typical characterisation of the pupil support role as a lower order professional with limited agency and power (Bishop, 2021). Howard and Ford (2007, 30) reporting findings of a qualitative study of fourteen Teacher Aides employed in 10 Australian secondary schools found a similar expression “... it’s as if it is made-up, invented and changed with the students...” used by TAs to illustrate their frustration at the lack of written information about their roles, with the authors highlighting the feelings of isolation navigating their own course through the physical, social and administrative structures of the school. Moreover, examining the school experiences of pupils with SEND in mainstream secondary settings in England in the SENSE study, Webster and Blatchford (2019, 100) suggest that the TA be understood from the pupil perspective as one role as one which operates in *‘the gaps left by teachers’* within school systems for SEN (Gibson et al., 2015; Lehanne, 2016) often undertaking tasks which have not been assigned to other staff members.

One reading of this sub-theme within the qualitative data would be to ascribe CA practice at post-primary level to the more diffuse working patterns and supervision arrangements across the subject-orientated school day (Howard and Ford, 2007). In some respects, this interpretation aligns with the enhanced status of the Higher-Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) role in England and Wales which operates as ‘the autonomous TA’ (Slater and Gazeley, 2019) with an ability to utilise higher levels of skill and expertise to make enhanced provision in some areas of teaching and learning for pupils with SEN. Attaining HLTA status requires head teacher endorsement, the completion of accredited training and the assessment of a set of 33 HLTA competencies which demonstrate attributes, knowledge and understanding and professional skills in teaching and learning, and monitoring and

assessment activities. In contrast, the ad hoc adoption of a more autonomous role within NI context cannot be substantiated in this way.

This finding has significant implications for pupils, teachers and schools as it belies recurrent findings within the international research community on the status of CAs as the least qualified member of staff supporting pupils with the greatest needs (Giangreco and Doyle, 2009; Blatchford et al, 2012; O'Connor and Hansson, 2012; Watson et al., 2013; Giangreco 2013, 2021). The CA role is prescribed as a subordinate position working under the direction of the teacher (EA, 2021). A key competency for teachers is the deployment, organisation and guidance of the work of other adults to support pupils' learning when appropriate (GTCNI, 2007).

An alternative reading of this sub-theme could instead relate to the insecure professional or occupational identity of CAs, in addition to the absence of appropriate knowledge for CAs. Previous research identifies this as an area of difficulty for CAs who occupy a precarious position within the school hierarchy and experience complications reconciling the conflicting aspects of their support work (Watson et al, 2013; Stephenson and Carter, 2014). The qualitative findings on this issue highlight the varied experiences of CAs in developing and communicating a coherent understanding of their role/s, an experience which hampered by ambiguous job descriptions, and guidance.

6.2.2.3 A Liminal Role for CAs

A further CA characterisation of the role in this study was the mediating function of assistants as a 'safe bridge', functioning as a mediation between pupils and their subject teachers at post-primary level. This finding, identified in the qualitative data, acknowledged both the positive experiences and difficulties associated with

managing working relationships with multiple subject teachers and adolescent pupils at post-primary level. This finding reflects previous qualitative studies (Watson et al., 2013; Lehane 2016) which identify the role of assistants as a ‘go-between’ or connectors of the educational stakeholder groups (Ebersold, 2003; Chopra et al., 2004; Cajkler et al., 2006; Giangreco, Suter and Doyle, 2010).

Moreover, CA perceptions on the assistant – teacher relationship echoes the work of Mansaray (2006), Lehane (2016) and others (Rutherford, 2011; Slater and Gazeley, 2019; Clarke, 2021a; Griffith and Blatchford, 2021) in TA’s use of spatial and relational discourses to describe their work. Spatial metaphors are often used to illuminate perceptions of the liminal space they occupy articulating the uncertain territory between both teaching and non-teaching roles within the core-periphery model of classroom teaching and learning (Mansaray, 2006).

The concept of liminality examined by Mansaray (2006) in the primary school context provides a relevant exploratory interpretation of the TA role in the inclusion of pupils with SEN. This concept is adopted from cultural anthropology in which liminality is understood as “a space of transformation, a state of being in between states” (Mansaray, 2006, 174). Initially the TA role was considered as positioned within educational policy contexts as “transitional, incomplete, ambiguous and incoherent” located at the boundary or periphery of a teacher’s role in the classroom (Mansaray, 2006, 174). Presenting an analysis of a series of ethnographic semi-structured interviews with TAs employed in two inner-city London primary schools, Mansaray advanced a further critical understanding of the concept to characterise the role within the ‘multi-dimensional nature of inclusion’ (ibid, 184).

“This interpretation is based on the critical notion of liminality, which emphasises the boundary position of the liminal entity, and locates liminality as an internal and core process of differentiation. ... TAs negotiate their working identities in various contexts, vis-à-vis teachers, parents, children and others. Daily interactions are replete with delicate and subtle tensions which reveal anxieties regarding the TA’s role and authority and the complex and dynamic division of labour within school” (Mansaray, 2006, 184).

Within this doctoral study, findings on CA interactions with teachers were characterised as infrequent opportunities to provide information about pupils and feedback on their learning. A small number of CAs reported perceiving a key advisory role which enhanced teachers’ provision of inclusive learning experiences. In contrast, CA interactions with pupils were defined by their continuous contact with pupils throughout the school day with the provision of a high level of time and attention to pupils. The findings of this study can be located within this interpretation, exploring the shared conceptualisations by CAs of the tensions within their expanding role as expanding, ‘betwixt and between’ (Mansaray, 2006, 178, citing Turner, 1969, 95) the teacher’s role.

6.2.3 CA Role Reconfiguration

In response to growing research and policy interest in the work of CAs in inclusive classrooms, many jurisdictions have begun to reconfigure the role of CAs in line with revised SEN policy and legislation and wider international initiatives. Notable examples of relevance to this research include the role of the TA and HLTA in England and Wales (Hancock et al., 2010; Graves, 2014) and the Inclusion Support Assistant in the Republic of Ireland (Zhao et al, 2021).

As discussed in section 2.1.3, the role of the TA in England developed as part of a number of national policy initiatives. With a focus on modernising the educational workforce and relieving teachers of less professional tasks, the National Agreement (2003) sought to redefine both teaching and support roles in England and Wales through a career progression scale for TAs. At the pinnacle of this scale is accreditation as a Higher-Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA), a post developed to address teacher workload (Hancock et al., 2010). Importantly, this initiative identified a key role for assistants within teaching and learning. HLTA accreditation is envisioned as a progression route for TAs, with an option to develop to qualified teacher status. Crucially, HLTA status is seen as an accredited career pathway, attained through assessment of thirty-six standards of practice which include professional attributes, knowledge and understanding, and professional skills in planning; monitoring and assessment; and teaching and learning activities. Additionally, candidates are required to complete a three-day training programme, with classroom assessment undertaken by regional training providers (HLTA partnership). An important caveat for this role is that the core functions must be carried out under the direction of class teachers and with the endorsement of the school principal (National HLTA Partnership, 2020). The scheme is government funded as a key element of a TA learning and development pathway, and crucially implemented as a source of support for schools outside the SEND framework.

Recent evaluation of the HLTA scheme (Kilbride and Philips, 2019), commissioned by the Welsh government, concluded that while the accreditation scheme held an array of benefits (including increased remuneration, confidence, self-esteem, greater responsibility, autonomy and personal achievement), it also came with substantial disadvantages and barriers to practice, principally in relation to the

accessibility of the scheme to TAs, the limited scope for further career progression and HLTA role ambiguity. It concluded with the following assessment.

“At the heart of this issue is the lack of clarity over what it means to be an HLTA... Whilst affording schools flexibility in how they deploy HLTAs is enabling some innovative, outcome-focused activities, this ambiguity also creates opportunities for exploitation and creates resentment. The main conclusion drawn from the research is that the scheme is clearly valued across the sector and warrants on-going support” (Kilbride and Philips, 2019, 33).

Most recently, Education Wales have implemented a set of professional standards for all school practitioners which clarify the role of TAs and HLTAs as ‘assisting teaching’. Assisting teaching forms part of a wider educational transformation; Education Wales has proposed a set of professional standards as well as introduced professional registration for learning support workers in schools within the reconfigured Education Workforce Council (EWC) (Previously the GTCW). A similar initiative has also recently been implemented in Scotland (EIS).

Another recent example of role reconfiguration can also be seen in the Republic of Ireland where review of the SNA scheme has resulted in a re-designation of the role to that of Inclusion Support Assistant (ISA) (Zhao et al., 2021). Whilst a comprehensive review (NCSE, 2018) of the framework for provision of additional adult support for pupils with additional care needs in Irish schools identified key strengths of the current practice, it also highlighted comparable challenges such as operation of assistants outside of the prescribed remit as well as escalating expenditure.

“We found that the SNA scheme has played a very important part in assisting students with additional care needs to attend schools, both mainstream and special...we have concluded that a better model of support is required. SNAs are seen as the answer to everything and work within a scheme that is ‘a blunt instrument’ to address a wide range and variety of needs. We reported that it was possible to devise ...an improved model for providing care supports” (NCSE, 2018, 3-4).

The review provided an endorsement of the care role positively perceived by the range of stakeholders and sought to strategically develop the role of assistants with a specific focus the explicit non-teaching nature of support (NCSE, 2018).

In the local context, there is emerging evidence to suggest that post-primary schools are seeking to move beyond traditional SEN support models which rely heavily on the allocation of CA support (ETI, 2018). ETI (2018) have reported on alternative support options, including the use of specialist SEN teachers to provide targeted curricular support for pupils with statements of SEN as well as other bespoke and specialist support roles including a youth worker and learning mentor. Perceptions echoed in policy guidance state that inclusive outcomes for pupils could be best achieved when CA support was provided universally to all pupils within class groupings (DE, 2011). Indeed, a small number of empirical studies (Giangreco, 2013; 2021) and grey literature (NICCY, 2020) advocate for alternative support allocation models which pair CAs to teachers or classrooms rather than to individual pupils’ with a statement of SEN. This is suggested as a means to develop collaborative partnerships between teachers and CA, enhance teacher engagement with pupils with SEN, and reduce perceptions of pupil dependence on the support of individual assistants (Giangreco, 2021).

In conclusion, there is increasing recognition of the contradictory and uncertain position of pupil-based support staff within the inclusive education agenda. Competing discourses cast the role as both key to the inclusion of pupils with SEN in mainstream classes, as well as a key barrier to the development of meaningful inclusive experiences for young people (Giangreco, 2021). Within this programme of study, CAs undoubtedly evidenced their varied and increasingly complex contribution to a range of supports for pupils with SEN. A recent interpretation of this situation has suggested that CA support as a step on the development to inclusion (Breyer et al., 2020), with the acknowledgement that further empirical work and policy development is required to develop the capacity of schools to meet the needs of pupils with SEN.

6.3 Membership of the Educational Community

This discursive theme encapsulates CA perspectives and experiences of working as paraprofessionals within the education sector. Specifically, it draws together CAs' reporting of preparing for their role through qualifications and training, as well as collaborative planning and working with subject teachers, the SENCO and wider CA team at post-primary level. A final sub-theme explores the synthesised quantitative and qualitative findings on CA job satisfaction, status and conditions of employment. Collectively, the findings suggest that current practice provides limited membership within the educational community at post- primary level, restricting the potential for and the sustainability of inclusive education

6.3.1 CA Qualifications and Training: realities and relevance

A core theme within this study was the typical trends in preparation for CAs at post-primary level through pre-service qualifications and in-service training. The questionnaire data revealed a number of illuminating insights into CA qualifications. Firstly, in line with previous regional research (Moran and Abbott, 2002; Abbott et al., 2011; O'Connor and Hansson, 2012) CAs in this study reported an eclectic mix of qualifications. Close examination of the highest level of pre-service qualification found that over two-thirds of CAs in this sample held qualifications which exceeded specifications of the CA role, whilst over two-thirds reported qualifications at levels four and five or above, including undergraduate (level 6) or postgraduate degrees and teacher education (level 7). However, in contrast to other UK studies (Blatchford et al., 2012; Skipp and Hopwood, 2019), a small proportion of CAs in this sample reported qualifications below level three or an absence of any formal qualifications. Such findings merit scrutiny highlighting the lack of standardised qualifications for assistants regionally.

The findings of this study provide further insight into the singular experience of CAs at post-primary level, evidencing a trend toward higher entry qualifications in the post-primary sector. Within their national sample of TAs in England and Wales, Blatchford et al., (2012) found the highest level of TA qualification to be at or below GCSE level (59%), with low levels of assistants with no qualifications (1%) or enhanced higher level qualifications at level 5 or 6 (25%). Previous regional research found that CAs in NI possessed the typical profile: NVQ level 3 (65%), early years vocational training (27%) and a small number of assistants with degrees in childcare or nursing (7%) (Abbott et al, 2011).

It is arguable that patterns of recruitment and preparation of assistants have shifted towards a greater diversity of qualifications. Additionally, it could be suggested that this conflation aligns with the lack of consistency in job descriptions. This trend reflects previous research on the heterogeneity of the assistant workforce (Lowe, 2011). Of interest in the current study, is the emergence of two sub groups within the sample of CAs; those with postgraduate qualifications relevant to SEN; and those with teaching qualifications who are employed as CAs. Higher levels of graduate qualifications have a range of implications for the paraprofessional nature of the CA role, including the educational experience of pupils allocated CA support, and collaborative practice with teachers, as well as remuneration and professional identity of the wider workforce. While self-reported, this data raises further questions about the knowledge and skill levels sought by schools in the recruitment of assistants and in their practice at post-primary level. It also raises questions about potential conflicts between teaching staff and CAs holding comparable, if not equal, qualifications, specifically those related to SEN.

The uneven profile of qualifications for CAs has wide ranging implications for equitable provision for pupils, the professionalism of teachers as well as for the recruitment, retention and remuneration of assistants (Skipp and Hopwood, 2019). Such a situation suggests that the current question of the appropriateness of qualifications for CAs in post-primary is currently unresolved. It is possible to suggest that in this context the JNC circular (EA, 2021) and the job descriptions framework (appendix 2) utilised by the EA serves to exacerbate the current tensions surrounding the issues of a lack of consensus on the exact nature and level of the CA qualifications, training and professional learning. Such a debate is closely associated with the capacity of SEN training within initial teacher education and CPD.

Moreover, the atypical qualifications of participants, specifically the number of qualified teachers within this CA sample, potentially reflects the idiosyncratic trends reacting to recruitment and retention of the teaching workforce in Northern Ireland (Clarke and Magennis, 2016). This in turn, prompts further questions about the status and value of teachers working in non-pedagogic roles, as well as the diversification of the workforce to meet the increasing prevalence and diversity of pupil needs regionally, particularly the post-primary sector (O'Connor, 2021, McConkey 2022). In primary settings, Basford et al., (2017) observed the recruitment of TAs in primary schools with specialist knowledge of SEN. Exploring developments in the deployment of assistants, Skipp and Hopwood (2019, 29) noted the recent trend of higher qualification requirements for TAs employed in English state-funded secondary schools, identifying a preference for TAs with an undergraduate degree. It was observed that this practice supported TAs seeking a route into teaching and while unintentionally contribute to a high turnover of support staff, it was also viewed by a small number of schools as a 'valuable pipeline for growing their own teachers'.

In the NI context, the findings of this doctoral research extend that of Abbott et al., (2011) which examined the professional needs of LSA across the special, primary and secondary settings, evidencing the continued problem of consistent and relevant qualification opportunities for assistants as pre-service preparation methods for pupil-based roles in the secondary settings. Concerns over qualifications and training for CAs, mirrors a wider policy gap, with recognition there are uncertain requirements for the wider educational workforce in relation to special education needs and inclusive education. Stephenson and Carter, (2014) suggests that when

class teachers have limited access to qualifications and training in SEN, it is inconsistent for TAs to hold such knowledge and competencies.

A small number of CAs elaborated their views on vocational training within the interviews, suggesting that completion of such options offered limited relevance and skill set for their CA roles in post-primary settings. Such views resonate with previous research which highlighted the limited relevance of childcare courses for support work with older pupils (Abbott et al, 2011) and the continued problem of a lack of relevant training routes for CAs working in the post-primary sector, particularly in relation to SEN, appropriate instructional approaches and support for adolescent development (Kerins et al., 2018). Due to the lack of clarity, around access to, and relevance and recognition of, appropriate qualifications, it is clear that an insecure professional identity prevails for CAs in this sample which, in turn, limits their membership of the school community. As discussed, this has implications for their support for learners, for the teaching workforce who they are appointed to support, those that are responsible for their management, as well as for the wider sustainability of capacity building for inclusive practice in post-primary schools. This has been a recurrent observation in empirical literature (Doherty, 2004, Howard and Ford, 2007; O'Connor and Hansson, 2012; Kerins et al., 2018), with more recent studies drawing attention to the persistent systemic problems in developing a multi-tiered educational workforce.

“... if a proper qualification for teaching assistants, sound induction, continuing professional development tailored to needs, fairer conditions of employment and a clear career structure, based on an audit of current practice are firmly linked to in-service arrangements that address and meet the training needs of teachers managing TAs, there can be greater

opportunities for improving the learning of all pupils” (Moran and Abbott, 2002, 171).

A key paradox for educational policy makers is the task of developing the capacity of the education system to ensure that *all* members of the educational team have access to high-quality, appropriate professional learning opportunities in order to fulfil their function as educators for children and young people. Inclusive education demands staff members with the knowledge and skills to develop and deliver meaningful educational opportunities for all children. This is a societal imperative for children and parents whose day-to-day educational experience is fraught with difficulties associated with SEN. Based on the findings of this research, it is possible to suggest that in the two decades since the publication of key regional research (Moran and Abbott, 2002) on the work of CAs in NI, little meaningful change or progress to preparation, collaborative working relationships, or conditions of employment for CAs has been achieved regionally.

6.4 Conclusion

The synthesised findings of the quantitative and qualitative phases of the research have illustrated the growing complexity of CA support at post-primary level. The discussion of the collective experiences and perspectives of this key group of practitioners has provided a unique insight into a hitherto unexplored section of the post-primary workforce.

This discussion chapter has presented a structured exploration of the key findings of this research and identified a range of implications for policymakers, practitioners and pupils within the local context of SEN policy review and reform. The following chapter will conclude this doctoral study, providing a reflection on the

strengths and limitations of the research, in addition to outlining key recommendations and avenues for future research.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.0 Chapter Outline

Chapter Seven concludes this doctoral research with a reflection on the original aims and objectives of the study and the associated findings. The chapter will outline the strengths and limitations of the research and offer a number of recommendations for SEN policymakers, educators, and practitioners. Drawing the study to a close, the chapter will identify areas for future research.

7.1 The Aim and Objectives of the study

The aim of the research has been to investigate the under-reported experiences and perceptions of CAs employed in post-primary schools to support pupils with SEN in Northern Ireland. In doing so, it has explored a broad range of inter-related themes including, the classroom assistant role, its deployment, and practice as well as qualifications, training, and professional development. The research additionally examined the experiences of CAs as paraprofessionals within the education workforce, including perceptions of their conditions of employment, status, and remuneration. The impetus for undertaking an explorative study stemmed from a dearth of regional empirical research and corresponding limited policy focus on this workforce, particularly in the post-primary sector.

Moreover, this doctoral research was undertaken against the backdrop of a protracted SEN policy and legislation review. Its timeliness, therefore, has potential to inform understandings of the CA role in schools as well as contribute to debate on how pupils with SEN are supported in mainstream settings. The methodological approach provided an in-depth examination of the views and lived experience of

practitioners through a two-phase mixed method study combining questionnaire survey with in-depth qualitative interviews. The synthesised findings provided an illuminating and timely insight into the CA workforce. The following sections offer an assessment of the strengths and limitations of this doctoral study.

7.2 The Contributions to Knowledge

The research achieved its aim, making a robust and timely addition to regional research through a unique exploration of the CA workforce at post-primary level. This was achieved through four key outcomes. Firstly, the thesis makes an important contribution to regional knowledge through its relevance to the current SEN policy context and implementation of the SENDA (2016) reforms and the ongoing contemporaneous reviews of SEN (DE, 2021; Independent Review of Education; 2021; DE, 2022). Relative to this process of policy review and reform, the central focus on the experience and perceptions of CAs achieves an authentic account of the realities of classroom work from the paraprofessional perspective.

Importantly, the contextual information outlined in the introduction extended regional knowledge by providing information on the growth in significant size of the CA workforce at regional level. Concurrently, the literature review contributed a comprehensive overview on the state of CA research, illustrating that while empirical studies proliferate internationally, relatively little was reported regionally. The findings represent an important contribution by addressing a significant gap in local knowledge on this expanding section of the education workforce, as well as highlighting both the financial and opportunity costs of the current system of SEN provision for CAs, their pupils and the provision of inclusive education in schools.

A particular strength of this study is the breadth and depth of insight it has provided on the practice of CAs and their perspectives within the post-primary

sector. The CA viewpoint provides a unique understanding into the daily realities of classroom life, which is significant and often overlooked. CA have a unique vantage point in inclusive classrooms. As practitioners, this provides significant scope for insight into pupils' learning. To date, little importance or consideration has been placed, at policy-level, on the potential of this role, or the opportunity which it presents.

Secondly, a further strength of this study is the methodological approach. The research was rigorously, systematically, and ethically conducted, utilising an exploratory sequential approach. The combination of the quantitative questionnaire with in-depth qualitative interview phases produced a multi-layered account of the experience and perspectives of CAs. This doctoral project was one of few studies to adopt a rigorous exploratory approach to elicit the voice of post-primary CAs in an investigation of their perspectives and experiences of their work as practitioners in NI schools. The central focus on the experience and perceptions of CAs achieves an authentic account of the realities of classroom work from the paraprofessional perspective. Crucially, the research identified CAs as a particularly difficult workforce group to access, with a number of operational and communication barriers which limited their potential participation in research activity. In the absence of practicable CA networks, this research adopted a novel approach to identifying a sizable and representative sample through the ALC framework. In doing so, the study was able to benefit from the structure provided through the Entitlement Framework to enhance the integrity of the sampling methodology.

Thirdly, the findings of the research represent an important empirical contribution by addressing several significant gaps in local knowledge on this expanding section of the school workforce. While many of the findings are in

agreement with international research, the strength of this study lies in the detailed description of the CA role by the practitioners themselves. In doing so, it makes contemporary contribution to the ongoing debate about the role(s) of assistants in education and provided a unique insight into the reality of the evolving, multi-faceted roles of CAs at post-primary level. The thesis extended previous regional research (Moran and Abbott, 2002, 2006; Abbott et al., 2011; O'Connor and Hansson, 2012), enhanced understanding of the ways in which CAs in post-primary prepared for their roles supporting pupils with SEN and highlighted CA perceptions of good practice and shortcomings within classroom collaboration and subject teacher supervision for CAs.

Finally, taken collectively, the findings highlight the persistent challenges for CAs providing support for pupils with SEN. The discussion of the findings demonstrates the evolving and multi-dimension role(s) of assistants and their precarious position at the intersection of care and education, inclusive practice, and teacher professionalism. The insight provided by this study has the potential to inform school leaders and policy-makers of the key contribute to addressing these challenges in order to optimise this workforce

7.3 Limitations of the research

Comprehensively, it is important within a rigorous, systematic, and ethical piece of work particularly as doctoral research to reflect on the limitations of the research. A non-representative sample is noted as a limitation for this study. While this is acknowledged as one of the key difficulties of educational research, efforts made to mitigate this limitation in sampling ensured the inclusion and participation of the full range of school types in NI including secondary and grammar schools, each of attended by a demographically and socially diverse pupil cohort. Overall, the recruitment and establishment of a purposive sample of post-primary schools willing to participate and provide access to their CA workforce was a necessary compromise within the timeframe of this doctoral research.

Additionally, the purposive sample and possible bias associated with this sampling approach is acknowledged as a potential limitation. Across the sample, the potential over-representation of the Voluntary Grammar (VG), Irish Medium (IM) and Integrated (IS) school sectors, with less representative participation from the Controlled (CS) and Maintained (CM) school sectors introduced a level of sampling bias into this study, with uneven illustration of the experiences and perceptions of those employed in certain sectors. Such limitations within the sample serves to reduce the validity and generalisability of the quantitative phase of the research.

Moreover, it is also acknowledged that the low response rate of the questionnaire phase (28%) adds potential limitations to this study. Initial aspirations to establish a regional sample of 197 regionally representative proved to be unfeasible, indicative in no small part of the relative inaccessibility of CAs the NI education workforce.

The sampling strategy was refined to encompass a pre-existing area learning communities that offered a range of post-primary school types.

Methodological compromises are part of the doctoral research process (Thomas, 2017) leading to limitations in the scale and sophistication of both sampling approaches and data collection methods. Indeed, the predominance of small-scale qualitative designs in the CA research agenda is acknowledged by key academics (Sharma and Salend, 2016; Giangreco, 2021; Webster and de Boer, 2021) who critique the higher incidence of student-based doctoral research and the lack of larger funded programmes of research of the work of CAs achieving larger samples and utilising ambitious research designs. As such they have argued for a reoriented research agenda which focuses on the wider international context of pupil support and service delivery models, and the potential opportunity costs of traditional deployment models (Webster and de Boer, 2021).

Finally, it is important to note the absence of alternative perspectives of the wider range of stakeholders such as teachers, SENCO, parents, and pupils with SEN in this research. To do so, however, would be to dilute the specific focus on this key workforce. In this respect, it is hoped that future research will expand knowledge in this area through involvement of one of these groups. The next sections will outline a series of recommendations, followed by potential areas for future research.

7.4 Research Dissemination

A key objective for scholarship in education is the contribution to, and stimulation of debate, review and reform of educational policies and practices, through the dissemination of research findings and recommendations for consideration and use by relevant policy and practice stakeholders. This section will outline the dissemination strategy of this research.

Firstly, due to the ongoing reviews of the wider educational and SEN policy taking place contemporaneously in Northern Ireland at the completion of this study, an executive summary of the study outlining the relevant findings, conclusion and recommendations was circulated to the ongoing reviews (January 2023) (section 6.1.4 and 7.2).

Secondly, following the completion of the research the EA published information relating to their strategic development relating to SEN within the SEND Transformation programme. The programme aims to transform our services and supports for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, and their families¹⁵ through thirteen projects across the full range of pupil support services and statutory operations. Of relevance to this research is a scheme of work focused on the consolidation of the Classroom Assistant employment model which aims to review the current employment model for CAs , optimise the capacity for change and development of the CA workforce and identify recommendations for change.¹⁶ In January and February 2023, the researcher met with the project manager to present information on the study and disseminate the findings. Following this, the researcher was also consulted drafts of auditing

¹⁵ <https://www.eani.org.uk/parents/special-educational-needs-sen/special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-send> [Last Accessed: 01/06/2023].

¹⁶ Ibid.

materials to support the progression of work on this project. As of March 2023, this project has been paused.

Thirdly, the findings of the study were shared with wider stakeholders across the SEN community and wider children's workforce. This included members of staff delivering CA vocational courses within the Further Education sector. The researcher met (January 2023) with lecturers on a range of CA courses at Belfast Met and Northern Regional College to present the findings of the research to inform the delivery of CA vocational courses. In April 2023, the researcher presented an overview of the research findings to a group of parents at a session delivered by the National Autistic Society NI.

Finally, throughout the doctoral research programme the researcher worked to develop a regional network for Classroom Assistants 'Classroom Assistants Network Northern Ireland'¹⁷. At the time of writing, the network provides an online forum for Classroom Assistants and educational staff in NI which aims act as a forum for the development of partnership and expertise across the regional workforce through discussion, dissemination of relevant publication and research, sharing of good practice and forging of links across the education sector. The membership of this group has grown to more than 9,000 members and serves as a useful communication tool for local researchers seeking to access the regional CA workforce and to disseminate relevant research and publications. The researcher was able to disseminate a relevant summary through this forum directly to the CA workforce at the culmination of the research.

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/498519980656738>

7.5 Recommendations

This exploratory research and the resulting analysis have generated a number of recommendations. The recommendations are structured to reflect the substantive themes within the theoretical framework and are mapped out in alignment with the WPR model.

7.5.1 Classroom Assistant Practice and Deployment

Firstly, this timely study can inform a review of the CA workforce as part of the wider SEN infrastructure. To date, there has been limited strategic direction and review of this expanding workforce (O’Conner et al, 2021b). Identification of a professionally appropriate role(s) for assistants remains an unresolved issue within the development of inclusive education. It is recommended that a review of the CA role is undertaken regionally, which takes account of the nuances of CA domains and characteristics within the post-primary sector. The review should be wide ranging in scope and inclusive of the key areas of focus explored in this research, namely, the multi-faceted role and wide-ranging duties as well as the level of involvement that CAs are taking in the educational experience of pupils with SEN. Further areas for consideration include the uneven levels of preparation and training and CAs experiences and perceptions of their conditions of employment and working conditions. Such a review is also timely with the ongoing implementation of revised legislation and policy from the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and would have the potential to inform the development of a robust set of policy and guidance resources for CAs to enhance future SEN policy.

Furthermore, it is recommended that a review of the CA workforce include specifically a critical examination of the current methods of the allocation and deployment of CA support across the post-primary sector. Methods of resourcing and funding classroom support have acquired significance for policymakers, local authorities, school leaders and parents within the current system of statutory assessment (NICCY, 2020), not least due to the delays in the statutory assessment process. At present, the current Code of Practice (DE, 1998) stipulates that special educational provision such as the Classroom Assistant support should be ‘specific, detailed and quantified’. There is evidence that individual allocation of CAs to pupils with SEN works against the principle of inclusion (Moran and Abbott, 2006). In the context of the current regional SEN policy issues, there is a need to assess whether the current resourcing model is meeting the needs of schools, of teachers and importantly, to understand if this model is meeting the diverse and changing needs of pupils with SEN.

The findings of this study suggest that current deployment model of an assistant allocated to individual or small groups of pupils creates tensions and ambiguities within classroom practice for CAs in their interactions with both pupils and teachers. Additional, further findings evidence the impact of this deployment model of the with implications for the sustainability of this model. In this respect, the review and development of the assistant workforce in other jurisdictions offers alternative deployment models which could be explored in a local context. In alignment with this recommendation, the EA have proposed a review of Classroom Assistant employment model within the SEND Transformation Programme which aims to review the current employment model for CAs , optimise the capacity for change and development of the CA workforce and identify recommendations for

change.¹⁸ This is a welcome development, and it is hoped to deliver a comprehensive review of the employment model for all grades of CAs and in different school types across NI.

Moreover, a systematic review of the CA workforce could inform an explicit policy for assistants is required to update the previous ghost policies operated by some ELBs prior to the establishment of the EA in 2016. Consideration should be given to a policy which acknowledges the distinctive roles of assistants in the pre-school, primary and post-primary phases, and the structural differences which impact on both practice and supervision. Significantly, this research has identified key domains of support provided by CAs as well as a degree of autonomy in developing a support role which can meaningfully support the diverse need of pupils across different curricular and classroom contexts. It is vital that CA policy takes account of the interaction of the key findings identified within this research including, preparedness of assistants, and the status of practitioners employed as SEN support. This recommendation is grounded in recognition of the implicit position of Classroom Assistants in the revised Code of Practice and limited guidance on the work of assistants given their centrality to SEN provision at all levels of education.

Within the regional context, it is an imperative to audit the ways in which the current workforce could helpfully support ongoing issues. In particular, a review of the CA workforce could usefully consider the role of assistants in the Education Restart programme and wider impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on post-primary pupils and their need for informal support within the school environment. Recent UK research (Moss et al, 2021), which included NI CAs for the first time as participants, highlights the contributions made by assistants as ‘unsung heroes’ of the pandemic

¹⁸ <https://www.eani.org.uk/parents/special-educational-needs-sen/special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-send> [Last Accessed: 01/06/2023].

playing a key front-line role in keeping schools open, and supporting teachers with online learning, and suggest a further role of assistants in the recovery efforts.

7.5.2 Education Workforce Development

Addressing the discrete findings of this study, there is a need for policy development in terms of the preparation requirements for CAs and for the teaching workforce who support them.

7.5.2.1 CA Training and Development

The study recommends inclusion of CAs within policy and strategic developments of training and CPD for school staff which aims to enhance the capacity of the full education workforce to meet the needs of learners and to provide inclusive educational experiences for all pupils. In relation to CAs, this recommendation is rooted in the lack of consensus and coherence in the qualification requirements for CAs. The current JNC Qualification Schedule (EA, 2021) lists 75 qualifications of relevance in the appointment of CAs ranging from level two to a level seven teaching qualification. In addition, the circular identifies a school sector most applicable for each qualification, crucially omitting the post-primary and special sectors. It is recommended that a review of the CA workforce consider the critical issues of CA training and professional development of CAs as an immediate area requiring policy attention. This is vital as the revised SEN framework places the greatest importance to date on the training within the education workforce to meet the increasing and diverse needs of pupils with SEN. The implementation of a revised framework will require the EA and schools to include CA training and

development opportunities with School Development Plans and the wider SEN action plan.

In line with a strategic approach to the preparation of CAs, there is a need to consider the development of a competency framework for assistants within the implementation of the revised Code of Practice. Consideration of the recurrent finding in the literature, in addition to those reported in this study in relation to the ambiguities and issues within the current CA job description. The inadequacy of the job description is a key finding of this research and must be addressed at policy level. Additionally, and as identified in this research, CA highlighted preference for informal methods of professional learning. In the context of inadequate and not entirely appropriate training and qualifications for assistants, particularly in the post-primary sector, a competency-based approach tied to induction, appraisal and professional development routes be developed for assistants could have merit and address the issues raised by assistants.

As noted within the discussion chapter (section 6.2), SEN reform in other UK jurisdictions has been accompanied by enhanced requirements for the registration and training of assistants as part of the development of Education Workforce Council organisations in both Scotland and Wales. Consideration of the applicability of this model of to include learning support staff in wider workforce development in NI would be timely given the dissolution of the GTCNI in 2021 and the ongoing consultation on its future development.

Structured and consistent professional development programmes for assistants are essential as a policy and practice recommendation and one which aligns with SENDA legislative revisions and the GTCNI Teacher Competency Framework. An audit of existing training and development opportunities regionally

may ensure a fair and inclusive provision which gives assistants working in all school types of the opportunity to access training opportunities in order to meet the specific requirements of the children supported. In essence, this could take a strategic systems level approach to ensure alignment between the current school population and the training of assistants. Finally, the development of an opportunity for shared professional learning for CAs, through the development of a knowledge sharing hub could enable the development of a CA network to share good practice. This study found that CAs had a preference for informal ‘on the job’ collaborative learning experiences. This could be enhanced within the ALC network and improve knowledge sharing between the special and mainstream settings.

7.5.2.2 Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Teacher Professional Learning (TPL)

While initial teacher education (ITE) and teacher professional learning (TPL) were not the focus on this research, the findings have clear implications for the teaching workforce. One of the key recommendations of the landmark DISS study (Blatchford et al., 2012) was the recommendation for great focus within teacher education and professional development on developing the capacity and skill of teachers to work collaboratively with non-teaching classroom-based support staff.

“... more needs to be done to prepare newly qualified and in-service teachers with the necessary skills and preparation to help them manage the TA role” (Blatchford et al., 2012, 120).

It is clear that there is a need to ensure at all levels of teacher training, that teachers are aware of the range of discourses and conceptual issues surrounding the role of CAs within inclusive classrooms, that teachers are informed of the multifaced nature of the work of CAs and the importance of collaborative partnership which inclusive requires. In

agreement with the recommendations of previous research, it is recommended that within the Higher Education sector providers of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) audit the ways in which student teachers are prepared to work in classroom with classroom assistant and ensure teachers are adequately prepared for this facet of their role. Moreover, this is also required to be provided as a form on ongoing teacher professional learning. While currently under revision, there is a need to support training and practicing teacher in their requirement to ‘deploy, organise and guide’ the work of CAs (GTCNI, 2007) and to ensure the teaching workforce has the opportunities to development of skills in communication, management and guidance of the sizable CA workforce. This could be informed by the ongoing independent review of SEN and DE review of Teacher Workload associated with SEN to ensure the development of collaborative partnerships between teachers and CAs as part of re-design and reform of special and inclusive education through SENDA (2016), implementation of the revised code of practice (2022), and the EA SEND Transformation Programme.

7.6 Areas for future research

The following areas of future research are identified to extend previous regional and international studies, as well as have significance in the regional context of SEN reform.

- Replication of the study on a larger scale representative of the school types and undertaking a focused examination of key domains and conceptualisations of CA support identified within this research. There is a need for a wider scoping study to establish a comprehensive profile of the CA workforce in order to inform future workforce planning in NI.

- Additionally, closer examination of CA support for key groups of pupils with the post-primary setting would also be of merit, particularly in the context of the changing profile of SEN regionally.
- There is a need for studies which explore the experiences of pupils with Statements of SEN and those with SEN without statements at post-primary level. Further research could conceptually explore the CA-pupil relationship to explore the dynamics of support from the perspective of pupils. Such research is aligned with the prioritisation of the pupil voice and their participation in decision making about support within the revised Code of Practice. The voice of parents and pupils, particularly at post-primary level would further triangulate and contribute to understandings of CA support.
- Observational research is required to further the spatial and relational understanding of the inclusive practice of assistants with the potential to develop a model of practice which could enhance collaborative practice between teacher and CAs.
- A further area of research could audit training and professional development opportunities for assistants reported in this study including pre-service, vocational, online, in-service, school-based and EA-based training, in addition to FE and HE courses for assistants to ensure consistent provision across NI.
- An under researched area regionally is the extent to which SEN support and, in particular, collaborative work with assistants is explored within initial teacher education and CPD for teachers and school leaders.

7.7 Personal and Professional Value of the Study

In line with the methodological approach adopted within this study, this section provides a reflective consideration of the personal and professional value of the programme of doctoral study. The opportunity to undertake doctoral research on the CA workforce represents the zenith of the researcher's personal and professional aspiration. The study which originated from the researcher's experiences as a CA within a post-primary setting in NI represented a singular developmental opportunity of a former CA seeking to add the CA voice to current discourse and enabled the researcher to evolve as early career researcher in education.

This course of study, undertaken over the period 2017 – 2022 has been both incredibly challenging, especially over the period 2020 – 2021, deeply enriching on a personal and professional level. The completion of the research denotes the achievement of an academic aspiration of postgraduate study. Specifically, the opportunity to comprehensively explore an area of study of keen personal and professional interest which represented an urgent gap in knowledge in the NI context and to make a contribution to knowledge in the regional field held significant value for the researcher. Undertaking doctoral study was beneficial in terms of skill development as an early career researcher gaining knowledge, experience and skill within both quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research.

Moreover, the opportunity to study with a range of academics and researchers acknowledged as experts in the field from a range of institutions including Ulster University, Stranmillis University College and University of East Anglia (UEA). Specifically, Dr Una O'Connor-Bones, Professor Linda Clarke and Dr Lesley Abbott, whose research in this area inspired my initial interest in Classroom

Assistant research. Their continuous support for the research project made the value of doctoral research self-evident. The completion of this programme of study represents a singular developmental opportunity changing the trajectory of a career in education.

7.8 Conclusion

This research has provided a unique and nuanced insight into the work of CAs in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. It has achieved its aim through an exploratory descriptive mixed method study. This study has broken new ground, eliciting the voice of CAs in the post-primary sector reporting their diverse experiences and unique perspective on the practice of inclusive education regionally.

The research findings have revealed a wide range of significant insights into the work of assistants within SEN support and educational inclusion. CA role seen by assistants as multi-faceted and evolving and can be characterised as liminal. CA preparation is varied and uneven, some assistants have enhanced qualification, while others have limited levels of SEN and CA specific training. For assistants, this study evidenced a greater appreciation and relevance of personal attributes, experience and skill informing perceptions on qualification and training. CAs place importance of social learning with the CA and SEN teams, as well as the wider educational workforce, in particular working with the SENCO. Some CAs shared negative perceptions and experiences of their status as paraprofessional, associated with remuneration, career development and, for some assistant's perceptions of value by teachers. This was experience interpreted as offering limited membership of the educational community.

This research has provided a timely, robust, and significant insight into CA perceptions and experiences at the ‘chalk face of inclusion’. It is hoped that this research will allow the voices to CAs to be carried further onto the regional policy and research agendas, as well as be of use to school leaders, teachers, and CAs and parents in the development and practice of inclusive education.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Freedom of Information data (EA and DE)

Appendix 2 EA Job Descriptions for Classroom Assistants (2021)

Appendix 3 Ethical Approval Documentation

Appendix 4 Sampling Challenges

Appendix 5 Questionnaire Piloting Checklist

Appendix 6 Participant Information Sheet

Appendix 7 CA Questionnaire

Appendix 8 Semi-Structured Telephone Interview Schedule

Appendix 9 Transcription Notation System

Appendix One Freedom of Information data

Department of Education (DE) DE/2017-0140, DE/2019-0112, DE/2021-0156.

Year	Sector	School Type	GA	CA-SEN	CA-ASN	Total
2011/12	Primary	GMI	90	148	3	241
	Secondary	VG	118	234	10	362
		GMI	9	243	23	275
2012/13	Primary	GMI	112	153	6	271
	Secondary	VG	124	247	0	371
		GMI	38	290	1	329
2013/14	Primary	GMI	101	158	8	267
	Secondary	VG	104	327	5	436
		GMI	17	266	2	285
2014/15 ⁴	Primary	GMI	120	161	4	285
	Secondary	VG	153	257	21	431
		GMI	60	286	32	378
2015/16 ⁵	Primary	GMI	139	163	5	307
	Secondary	VG	139	339	2	480
		GMI	53	283	7	343
2016/17	Primary	GMI	115	158	10	283
	Secondary	VG	213	318	8	539
		GMI	3	313	57	373
2017/18	Primary	GMI	111	170	5	286
	Secondary	VG	206	361	2	569
		GMI	55	338	2	395
2018/19 ⁶	Primary	GMI	105	165	9	279
	Secondary	VG	180	382	3	565
		GMI	21	374	7	402
2019/20 ⁷	Primary	GMI	104	182	3	289
	Secondary	VG	256	335	2	593
		GMI	15	260	0	275
2020/21	Primary	GMI	139	190	12	341
	Secondary	VG	247	463	0	710
		GMI	37	434	3	474

Source: voluntary grammar and grant-maintained integrated school support staff survey

1 - Primary includes preparatory departments of grammar schools.

2 - Figures provided are headcounts, this means a part-time classroom assistant will count the same a full-time classroom assistant.

3 - Figures are based on a reference date in the autumn term.

4 - One post primary did not make a return.

5 - One post primary school did not make a return.

6 - One primary school did not make a return.

7 - One primary school and 5 post primary schools did not make a return.

Education Authority (EA) RFI/1513, FOI 3346, FOI 7973

Post Classification

Classroom Assistant	Behavioural Assistant
	Behaviour Support Assistant JE3
	Classroom Assist JE1 (Protect Qual)
	Classroom Assist JE1 (Protect Unqual)
	Classroom Assist JE2 (Protect JE3)
	Classroom Assist JE2 (Protect Qual)
	Classroom Assist JE2 (Protect Recog)
	Classroom Assist JE2 (Protect Unqual)
	Classroom Assistant (Qual)
	Classroom Assistant (Recog)
	Classroom Assistant (Unqual)
	Classroom Assistant (Wrap around)
	Classroom Assistant JE1
	Classroom Assistant JE1 (Protect Recog)
	Classroom Assistant JE1 Protected
	Classroom Assistant JE2
	Classroom Assistant JE3
	Classroom Assistant JE3 Protected
	Classroom Assistant Protected
	Classroom Assistant Protected (Qual)
	Classroom Assistant Protected (Recog)
	Classroom Assistant Protected (Unqual)
	Classroom Assistant Trainee
	Learning Support Assistant

Comments

- The data held for each year includes figures detailing the number of employees and posts per year within each school type and post classification.

- Posts have been classified within an overall Main Job Area and then within a more detailed Post classification for Classroom/General Assistants
- Employees are able to hold multiple posts within/across schools, school type and post classification.

Please note the figures presented do not represent all Classroom Assistants/Teaching Assistants employed in Northern Ireland. EA is not the Employing Authority for Integrated or Voluntary Grammar Schools and this data is not captured above.

Total Number of CAs employed by the EA												
			2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Total No of CA/ TA Employees*			9823	10469	11115	11611	12097	12579	10917	11177	16133	16856
Total No of CA/TA Posts*			12687	13361	14250	14721	15336	16044	14772	15077	25035	24751
Breakdown for Primary and post-Primary												
Employees		Primary	6187	6533	6952	7322	7645	7895	8436	8569	9621	10220
		Post Primary	1734	1913	2017	2091	2176	2232	2432	2546	3258	3348
Posts		Primary	8496	8834	9419	9781	10300	10647	11598	2546	16584	16551
		Post Primary	2129	2324	2484	2515	2588	2633	2981	3070	4589	4456
Breakdown per Post-Primary Dataset												
			2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Controlled	Grammar	Employee s	108	122	127	127	139	146	154	145	318	278
		Posts	122	150	155	149	168	169	177	169	356	319
	Integrated	Employee s	9	23	34	35	41	46	141	134	266	268
		Posts	9	25	37	38	44	47	164	160	356	346
	Secondar y	Employee s	627	703	746	759	790	814	835	903	1457	1520
		Posts	743	825	900	902	925	949	973	1064	1613	1688
	IM	Employee s	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	6	9	12
		Posts	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	6	9	12
Maintaine d	Secondar y	Employee s	944	1029	1068	1128	1160	1171	1309	1367	2161	2178
		Posts	1203	1284	1336	1379	1403	1408	1664	1671	2536	2449

Appendix Two EA Job Descriptions for Classroom Assistants (2021)

- Supervisory Assistant NJC pts 1 - 2 | £17,842 - £18,198 per annum pro rata
- Nursery Assistant | NJC pts 1 - 4 | £17,842 - £18,933 per annum pro rata
- General Assistant 1 | NJC pts 2 - 3 | £18,198 - £18,562 per annum pro rata
- General Assistant 2 NJC pts 3 - 4 | £18,562 - £18,933 per annum pro rata
- Classroom Assistant – SEN NJC pts 5 - 6 | £19,312 - £19,698 per annum pro rata
- Classroom Assistant – ASN | NJC Pts 7 - 17 | £20,092 - £24,491 per annum pro rata

General Assistant 2 (Special Needs)**REPORTS TO:** The Principal through class teacher**JOB PURPOSE** To be responsible to the Principal for the provision of assistance to teachers/classroom assistants in/outside school with care of pupils.**MAIN DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES****GENERAL ASSISTANCE**

- Assist pupils with toileting/personal hygiene/dressing including the use of basic toileting aids.
- Ensure the safe mobility and general supervision of the pupil/s within school premises, including the playground and on school outings, transporting pupil's belongings (if required).
- Accompany teachers, classroom assistants and/or therapy staff with groups on outings or in respect of individual/group therapy programmes, e.g. swimming, educational outings, hydrotherapy etc.
- Ensure appropriate care and feeding of pupils at meal times.
- Ensure pupils comply with normal school rules and routines during the school day.
- Clean equipment connected with daily activities in classroom and assist with setting out equipment as directed.
- Such other duties as may be assigned within the level of the post. Those duties should be non-curricular.

ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE

- Undertake complex medical or invasive medical/clinical procedures.
- Use of specialist equipment for toileting and mobility for which specialist training is required.

- Provide specialist feeding support following assessment by a Speech and Language therapist under a formal programme identified by that assessment.

GENERAL CONDITIONS

- Carry out all duties to comply with:
 - (a) the Health and Safety at Work (NI) order 1978;
 - (b) Acts of Parliament, Statutory Instruments and Regulations and other legal requirements;
 - (c) Codes of Practice.
- Carry out all duties in the working conditions normally inherent in the particular job.
- Complete all necessary paperwork.
- Carry out duties for jobs up to and including those in the same grade, provided such duties are within the competence of the employee.

PERSON SPECIFICATION

Factor	Essential Criteria
Experience	<p>Have a minimum of six months' experience of working with a child/children in a school setting</p> <p>Demonstrable experience in one or more of the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing direct support to a child/children in a school setting • Providing support to a teacher and/or school staff inside or outside of the classroom • Providing additional direct support* to a child/children in a school setting <p><i>*Additional support is defined as undertaking medical procedures, using specialist support equipment, or providing specialist feeding support.</i></p> <p>Desirable Criteria</p> <p>Have a minimum of three months' experience of working with a child/children with medical needs.</p>
Knowledge	<p>Demonstrable knowledge of the requirements of a General Assistant 2 (Special Needs)</p> <p>Demonstrable knowledge of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child Protection and Safeguarding, as relevant to the role • Health and Safety regulations, as relevant to the role <p>Desirable Criteria</p> <p>Have received training on the administration of emergency medication for a child with Diabetes.</p> <p>Evidence of a working knowledge of one or more of the following IT systems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Microsoft Word and Outlook • C2K schools IT systems
Skills / Abilities	<p>Evidence of an ability to work flexibly to help ensure a child-centred learning experience</p> <p>Evidence of effective interpersonal and communication skills</p> <p>Proven effective team working skills</p> <p>Evidence of good planning and organising skills to ensure work is completed on time to the required standard</p>
Values Orientation	<p>Evidence of how your experience and approach to work reflect the school's values/ethos. You will find information about the school's values/ethos on our school website here</p>
Other	<p>Willingness to undertake job related training as and when required.</p>

Classroom Assistant – Special Educational Needs

REPORTS TO: The Principal, through the class teacher

JOB PURPOSE Under the direction of the class teacher/outreach teacher/Education Authority, assist with the educational support and the care of the pupil(s) with special educational needs who is/are in the teacher's care in or outside the classroom.

MAIN DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The precise duties of the post will be determined by the principal/outreach teacher/Education Authority officer.

SPECIAL CLASSROOM SUPPORT

- Assist the teacher with the support and care of pupil(s) with special educational needs e.g. enable access to the curriculum, attend to personal needs including dietary, feeding, toileting etc.
- Develop an understanding of the specific needs of the pupil(s) to be supported.
- Assist with authorised programmes (e.g. Education Plan, Care Plan), participate in the evaluation of the support and encourage pupil(s) participation in such programmes.
- Contribute to the inclusion of the pupil in mainstream schools under the directions of the class teacher.
- Assist with operational difficulties and non-invasive medical/clinical difficulties pertaining to pupil(s) disabilities.
- Support in implementing behavioural management programmes as directed.
- Assist pupil(s) in moving around school and on and off transport.

GENERAL CLASSROOM SUPPORT

- Assist pupil(s) learn as effectively as possible both in group situations and on their own by assisting with the management of the learning environment through:
 - clarifying and explaining instruction;
 - ensuring the pupils are able to use equipment and materials provided;
 - assisting in motivating and encouraging the pupil(s) as required;
 - assisting in areas requiring reinforcement or development;
 - promoting the independence of pupils to enhance learning;
 - helping pupil(s) stay on work set;
 - meeting physical/medical needs as required whilst encouraging independence.
- Be aware of school policies, procedures and of confidential issues linked to home/pupil/teacher/school work and to keep confidences appropriately.
- Establish a supportive relationship with the pupils concerned.
- Prepare and produce appropriate resources to support pupil(s) and take care of material for play sessions.
- Supervise groups of pupils, or individual pupils on specified activities including talking and listening, using ICT, extra curricular activities, and other duties, as directed by the class teacher/officer.
- Under the direction of the teacher, and following an appropriate risk assessment, assist with off-site activities.
- Provide continuity of adult care of e.g. supervising play and cloakrooms including hand washing, toileting etc.
- Provide supervision/support including the administration of prescribed medicines and drugs for children who are ill and deal with minor cuts and grazes.

- Ensure as far as possible a safe environment for pupils.
- Report to the class teacher any signs or symptoms displayed which may suggest that a pupil requires expert or immediate attention.

ADMINISTRATION

- Assist with classroom administration.
- Assist the class teacher and/or other professionals with the implementation of the system for recording the pupil(s) progress.
- Contribute to the maintenance of pupil(s) progress records.
- Provide regular feedback about the pupil(s) to the teacher/officer.
- Duplicate written materials, assist with production of charts and displays, record radio and television programmes, catalogue and process books and resources.

OTHER DUTIES

- Attend relevant in-service training.
- Assist work placement students with practical tasks.
- Such other duties as may be assigned by the principal/outreach teacher/Education Authority officer within the level of the post.

It is recognised that by the nature of the work of the classroom assistant a degree of flexibility is required and accordingly staff may be requested to carry out certain miscellaneous duties in addition to those set out above.

PERSON SPECIFICATION

Factor	Essential and Desirable Criteria
Qualifications/ Professional Membership	Hold a minimum of a Level 2 childcare qualification.
Experience	<p>Have a minimum of six months' experience of working with a child/children in a formal learning environment e.g. school, nursery or playgroup</p> <p>Desirable Criteria</p> <p>Have a minimum of one years' experience of working with a child/children with special educational needs</p> <p>Have a minimum of six months' experience working as a Classroom Assistant with a child/children with special educational needs</p>
Knowledge	<p>Demonstrable knowledge of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The requirements of a Classroom Assistant (special educational needs) • Child development issues • Health and safety requirements, relevant to the role
Skills / Abilities	<p>Evidence of an ability to work flexibly and creatively to help ensure a child-centred learning experience</p> <p>Highly effective interpersonal and communication skills</p> <p>Proven team working and collaborative skills</p> <p>Evidence of effective planning and organising skills to ensure work is completed on time to the required standard</p> <p>Evidence of a working knowledge of information technology systems including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Microsoft Word and Outlook, and/or • C2K schools IT systems
Values Orientation	Evidence of how your experience and approach to work reflect the school's values/ethos. You will find information about the school's values/ethos on our school website.

Classroom Assistant – Additional Special Educational Needs

REPORTS TO: School Principal, through class teacher

JOB PURPOSE Under the direction of the class teacher/outreach teacher/Education Authority officer, assist with the educational support and the care of the pupil(s) with special educational needs who is/are in the teacher's care in or outside the classroom.

MAIN DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The precise duties of the post will be determined by the principal/outreach teacher/Education Authority officer.

ADDITIONAL SPECIAL CLASSROOM SUPPORT

(at least one of the three duties below should be carried out as a requirement of the post)

- Undertake more comprehensive or invasive medical/clinical procedures.
- Help pupils with specialist communication skills and/or sensory difficulties access the curriculum.
- Deal with pupils with very challenging behaviour as identified by the Educational Psychology Service as requiring additional provision.

SPECIAL CLASSROOM SUPPORT

- Assist the teacher with the support and care of pupil(s) with special educational needs e.g. enable access to the curriculum, attend to personal needs including dietary, feeding, toileting etc.
- Develop an understanding of the specific needs of the pupil(s) to be supported.
- Assist with authorised programmes (e.g. Education Plan, Care Plan), participate in the evaluation of the support and encourage pupil(s) participation in such programmes.

- Contribute to the inclusion of the pupil in mainstream classroom under the direction of the class teacher.
- Assist with operational difficulties and medical difficulties pertaining to pupil(s) disabilities.
- Support in implementing behavioural management programmes as directed.
- Assist pupil(s) in moving around school and on and off transport.

GENERAL CLASSROOM SUPPORT

- Assist pupil(s) learn as effectively as possible both in group situations and on their own by assisting with the management of the learning environment through:
 - clarifying and explaining instruction;
 - ensuring the pupils are able to use equipment and materials provided;
 - assisting in motivating and encouraging the pupil(s) as required;
 - assisting in areas requiring reinforcement or development;
 - promoting the independence of pupils to enhance learning;
 - helping pupil(s) stay on work set;
 - meeting physical/medical needs as required whilst encouraging independence.
- Be aware of school policies, procedures and of confidential issues linked to home/pupil/teacher/school work and to keep confidences appropriately.
- Establish a supportive relationship with the pupils concerned.
- Prepare and produce appropriate resources to support pupil(s) and take care of material for play sessions.
- Supervise groups of pupils, or individual pupils on specified activities including talking and listening, using ICT, extra curricular activities, and other duties as directed by the class teacher/officer.

- Under the direction of the teacher, and following an appropriate risk assessment, assist with off-site activities.
- Provide continuity of adult care of e.g. supervising play and cloakrooms including hand washing, toileting etc.
- Provide supervision/support including the administration of prescribed medicines and drugs for children who are ill and deal with minor cuts and grazes.
- Ensure as far as possible a safe environment for pupils.
- Report to the class teacher any signs or symptoms displayed which may suggest that a pupil requires expert or immediate attention.

ADMINISTRATION

- Assist with classroom administration.
- Assist the class teacher and/or other professionals with the implementation of the system for recording the pupil(s) progress.
- Contribute to the maintenance of pupil(s) progress records.
- Provide regular feedback about the pupil(s) to the teacher.
- Duplicate written materials, assist with production of charts and displays, record radio and television programmes, catalogue and process books and resources.

Factor	Essential Criteria
Qualifications/ Professional Membership	<p>Hold a minimum of a Level 2 childcare qualification as approved by EA</p> <p>Desirable Criteria</p> <p>Hold GCSE passes at grades A*- C in English and/or Mathematics, or equivalent or higher-level qualifications</p> <p>Hold a minimum of a Level 3 childcare qualification as approved by EA</p>
Experience	Have a minimum of six months' paid experience of working with a child/children with special educational needs in a special school and/or a special unit attached to a mainstream school
Knowledge	<p>Demonstrable knowledge of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The requirements of a Classroom Assistant (additional special educational needs) • Child development issues • Health and safety requirements, relevant to the role
Skills / Abilities	<p>Evidence of a working knowledge of information technology systems including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Microsoft Word and Outlook, and/or • C2K schools IT systems <p>Evidence of an ability to work flexibly and creatively to help ensure a child-centred learning experience</p> <p>Highly effective interpersonal and communication skills</p> <p>Proven team working and collaborative skills</p> <p>Evidence of effective planning and organising skills to ensure work is completed on time to the required standard</p>
Values Orientation	Evidence of how your experience and approach to work reflect the school's values/ethos. You will find information about the school's values/ethos on our school website

Appendix Three Ethical Approval Documentation

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER GOVERNANCE

RESEARCH

RG3 Filter Committee Report Form

Project Title

The role and contribution of teaching assistants to support inclusion in mainstream post-primary schools in NI.

Chief Investigator

Dr O'Connor Bones

Filter Committee

Steven Park and Stanley Black

This form should be completed by Filter Committees for all research project applications in categories A to D (*for categories A, B, and D the University's own application form – RG1a and RG1b – will have been submitted; for category C, the national, or ORECNI, application form will have been submitted).

Where substantial changes are required the Filter Committee should return an application to the Chief Investigator for clarification/amendment; the Filter Committee can reject an application if it is thought to be unethical, inappropriate, incomplete or not valid/viable.

Only when satisfied that its requirements have been met in full and any amendments are complete, the Filter Committee should make one of the following recommendations:

The research proposal is complete, of an appropriate standard and is in category A and the study may proceed*

☒

category B and the study must be submitted to the University's Research Ethics Committee** Please indicate briefly the reason(s) for this categorisation

☐

category C and the study must be submitted to ORECNI along with the necessary supporting materials from the Research Governance Section***

☐

category D and the study must be submitted to the University's Research Ethics Committee**

☐

Signed: Dr Stanley Black

Date: 7.6.2019

Chairperson/Administrator of Filter Committee

*The application form and this assessment should now be returned to the Chief Investigator. The Filter Committee should retain a copy of the complete set of forms.

** The application form and this assessment should now be returned to the Chief Investigator so that he/she can submit the application to the UUREC via the Research Governance section. The Filter Committee should retain a copy of the complete set of forms for their own records.

*** The application form and this assessment should now be returned to the Chief Investigator so that he/she can prepare for application to a NRES/ORECNI committee. The Filter Committee should retain a copy of the complete set of forms for their own records.

For all categories, details of the application and review outcome should be minuted using the agreed format and forwarded to the Research Governance section

Please complete the following

The application should be accompanied by an appropriate and favourable Peer Review Report Form (if not, the Filter Committee should be prepared to address this as part of its review). Please comment on the peer review (include whether or not there is evidence that the comments of the peer reviewers have been addressed).

The peer review was favourable.

Please provide an assessment of all component parts of the application, including questionnaires, interview schedules or outline areas for group discussion/unstructured interviews.

The application is satisfactory.

Please comment on the consent form and information sheet, in particular the level of language and accessibility.

The consent form and information sheet are satisfactory.

Please comment on the qualifications of the Chief and other Investigators.

The Chief Investigator is an experienced researcher

Please comment on the risks present in conducting the study and whether or not they have been addressed.

The risks which are minimal have been addressed.

--

Please indicate whether or not the ethical issues have been identified and addressed.

The ethical issues appropriate to this Category A study have been identified and addressed. Approval also achieved from other institutions

Please comment on whether or not the subjects are appropriate to the study and the inclusion/exclusion criteria have been identified and listed

Subjects are appropriate to the study.

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

RESEARCH GOVERNANCE

RG2 PEER REVIEW REPORT FORM

Project Title

The role and contribution of teaching assistants to support inclusion in mainstream post-primary schools in NI.

Chief Investigator

Dr. Una O'Connor-Bones

On the basis of the assessment below, this application:

- should proceed to the appropriate School/Faculty Research Governance Filter Committee ☒
- should be amended by the applicant as indicated in the comments and then proceed to the appropriate School/Faculty Research Governance Filter Committee for further consideration ☐
- requires substantial changes and should be revised and returned for further review ☐
- is not viable in its current form and should be withdrawn by the applicant ☐

Peer Review conducted by (please print)	Signature	Date
---	-----------	------

1. Mr Steven Park	S Park	June '19
2. Dr Stanley Black	S Black	7.6.19

Please answer the following questions

1. Please state your area of expertise in relation to reviewing this application (i.e. the subject, the methodology, or both).

I worked in the primary sector for six years as a teacher, middle-management coordinator and senior management Principal. Therefore, although not in the post-primary sector, I do have experience in deploying and utilising classroom teaching assistants to support inclusion in mainstream schools. I have taught students who had teaching assistants assigned specifically to them due to learning need and / or disability. In my own dissertation, I also used the two research methods proposed here – questionnaires and a semi-structured interview.

2. How does the proposed research make a contribution to the knowledge base? Is it otherwise justified for educational or training purposes?

The project outlines a good rationale for the research by pointing to the significant number of children with a special educational need in mainstream education. Classroom assistants are often assigned to these children but financial restraints often mean a limited number of assigned hours. Therefore, I feel this research does carry the potential to reveal interesting and relevant findings that could improve understanding in how TAs can be best utilised.

3. How does the application demonstrate appropriate understanding of the background and key issues on the part of the applicant(s)?

An extensive Research Protocol has been submitted within this approval application which demonstrates an appropriate level of understanding on the applicant's part.

4. Please comment on the applicant's record of research in the area or if the study is otherwise justified as a research/scientific training exercise?

The applicant has clearly investing in secondary research around this topic and has identified a lack of primary research in the area. Her ambition to better represent the perceptions and experiences of the actual CAs is a commendable one and I believe this justifies the project as a worthwhile exercise.

5. Please comment on the clarity of the aims and objectives/research questions?

The aim of the project is clear and the three research questions are based on a gap in the market in terms of the underrepresented voice of CAs. I believe the RQ are

clear, and if answered effectively, carry the potential to address the overall aim. I would assume that RQ2 will stretch to include the statutory CA training as opposed to just 'how the CAs prepare for their role..' ie how are they prepared and how do they prepare are two different slants.

6. Please comment on the adequacy and appropriateness of the methodology.

The applicant has opted for a mixed-methods approach with two phases – firstly an online questionnaire and secondly semi-structured interviews. I would advise that the results from phase 1 are used to guide and channel the Qs in phase 2 to allow the researcher to probe deeper.

There is a good sample size of 150 and 20 CAs respectively for the two phases and no vulnerable groups are involved. However, the sample has been confined to schools in the Belfast Area. Therefore, if this approach is maintained, the researcher must be careful to avoid sweeping statements about NI as a whole. Given that an online questionnaire has been chosen, geographical limitations do not exist and therefore it may have been an option to spread the questionnaire data collection across all 5 EA Regions and across different management types, and then to narrow the sample to suit researcher convenience in Phase 2 for the semi-structure interviews. Just an idea though!

Could be an option to include some open-ended boxes on the questionnaire to allow respondents to elaborate on suitable aspects.

7. Please comment on the project planning.

The project and timeframe appear to be well planned and appropriate.

8. Is the envisaged outcome likely to be achieved?

Yes, I believe that the ground work has been done well and that this project carries the potential to draw conclusions on, and make recommendations against, each of the three suitably revealed research questions.

9. Have the likely risks and ethical issues been identified and addressed?

Yes.

The application and both pages of this form should now be returned to the Chief Investigator

Appendix Four Sampling Challenges – ALC response

Dear Christina

I'm afraid that this issue has been raised before and our SEN Leaders and Classroom Assistants are currently too busy to undertake any research work with Ulster University. A similar request was discussed at Principal level last year and the decision to decline engagement with UU on this matter was agreed. There is so much going on in SEN departments at the moment and so much uncertainty surrounding SEN legislation it would be inappropriate to add to the current workload of SEN Leaders or Classroom Assistants and I am not in a position to answer on their behalf.

Apologies we are not able to be more helpful at this time.

Kind regards
ALC Co-ordinator

Appendix Five Piloting Checklist – CA Questionnaire

Piloting increases the reliability, validity, and practicality of the questionnaire; everything about a questionnaire should be piloted (Oppenheim, 1992)

Aspect	Comments
Clarify of Questions	
Clarity of Instructions	
Accessibility of the online survey	
How easy is it to read and understand ?	
How accessible is the language?	
Type of questions asked	
Additional or useless response categories	
Is anything repeated or non-relevant?	
Omissions – Is anything missed?	
How clear is the layout?	
Common issue or misunderstanding	
Leading Questions	
Number of questions	
How long to you think it took to complete?	

Appendix Six Participant Information Sheet

School of Education



An exploration of the role of the Classroom Assistant supporting Special Educational Needs in mainstream post-primary schools in Northern Ireland

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important that you understand what the research is for and what you will be asked to do. Please read the following information and do not hesitate to ask any questions about anything that might not be clear to you. Make sure that you are happy before you decide what to do. Thank you for taking the time to consider this invitation.

Research Information

- This research is being undertaken by the School of Education at Ulster University as part of a PhD programme. The aims of the research are outlined below.
- All aspects of the research process have been assessed by senior staff within the university and reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee on Date.
- All information will be held and destroyed in accordance with the University's data protection policy.
- Participation is voluntary. Participants are free to agree to participate in each phase of the research and to withdraw throughout the data collection and analysis.
- All information will be treated in strictest confidence. The identities of participants and schools will be anonymised.
- The researcher will be available to support Classroom Assistants for the duration of the study.

Aim

The aim of this study is to explore the role of Classroom Assistants who support pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland.

This study will address the following research questions:

1. What are the features and characteristics of CA support in post-primary schools?
2. How do CAs prepare for their role and support for pupils with SEN?
3. How do CAs perceive their role supporting pupils with SEN?

What is the purpose of the study?

This research explores the role of Classroom Assistants CAs supporting pupils with Special Educational Needs in post-primary schools.

The research is a two-phased project explores the role played in the classroom. The project will involve a questionnaire and an interview.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

You are being invited as a Classroom Assistant employed in a post-primary school within the sample area.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep. You will also be asked to sign a consent form.

What will happen if I take part?

If you are interested in taking part, you will be asked to complete an online questionnaire which will take approximately 25 minutes. If you are willing to complete the questionnaire at the phase 1, there is no obligation to take part in the interviews. If you are interested in being interviewed as part of the research, you will be invited take part at a later stage.

A face-to-face interview will be carried out by the researcher at a time and place that suits you. Interviews will last approximately 45 minutes. You will be asked to discuss your role supporting pupils in school.

What happens if I change my mind?

Involvement is voluntary; it is up to you whether you would like to take part. You can choose to withdraw from the study at any time before you submit your questionnaire without giving a reason. Similarly, you can withdraw from the interview at any time. There will be no consequences if you leave the study and any information collected before this point will be deleted and omitted from any analyses.

How will the information be recorded?

How will my data be stored?

Your information is protected by GDPR laws. The questionnaire information will be stored in a secure database. The interview discussion will be digitally recorded and transcribed. During and after the study, all information collected will be stored securely on a secure computer and an encrypted hard-drive.

Will the study be confidential?

The information you share with the researcher will be confidential and personal information will be anonymised. Your information will not be given to anyone or used outside the study. However, if you mention anything that is considered a risk to safety or safeguarding to children, the researcher may have to refer this to the designated child protection officer.

What are the risks for me?

The researcher has identified no personal risks in being involved in this study. Information given to the researcher is confidential and personal information will be anonymised – your details will be changed so you will not be identified in the research.

How will this research benefit me?



This study will allow you the opportunity to be involved in research about the role Classroom Assistants play in post-primary schools and discuss about your role. Your opinions and experiences are of central interest to the researcher.

Who can I talk to if I have questions?

If you have questions please feel free to contact the researcher **Christina Curran** at curran-c33@ulster.ac.uk or the Principal Investigators at ub.oconnor@ulster.ac.uk or lm.clarke@ulster.ac.uk.

School of Education

An exploration of the role of the Classroom Assistant supporting Special Educational Needs in mainstream post-primary Schools in Northern Ireland

This research is conducted by Christina Curran, Dr. Una O'Connor-Bones and Professor Linda Clarke.

Please Tick

I confirm that I have been given, read and understand the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have asked and have asked and received answers to any questions raised.

☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without my rights being affected in any way.

☐

I understand that the researchers will hold all information and data collected securely and in confidence and that all efforts will be made to ensure that I cannot be identified as a participant in the study (except as might be required by law) and

☐

I give permission for the researchers to hold relevant personal data for the period prescribed by the university.

☐

I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

I give consent to the recording of a recording device.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Name of Chief Investigator

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

One copy for the participant; one copy for the researcher.

Electronic Consent Form



Electronic Consent

This page is your agreement to take part in this study. Please note that you can withdraw at anytime by closing the webpage. If you have any questions please feel free to get in touch with the researcher Christina Curran at curran-c33@ulster.ac.uk or the Principal Investigators at ub.oconnor@ulster.ac.uk or lm.clarke@ulster.ac.uk. Click the response buttons if you agree and wish to take part. You may print a copy of this consent form for your records.

I confirm that I have been read and understand the Participant Information page for the this study. *

☒ I understand and agree to take part.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without my rights being affected in any way.*

☒ I understand and agree to take part.

I understand that the researchers will hold all information and data collected securely and in confidence and that all efforts will be made to ensure that I cannot be identified as a participant in the study (except as might be required by law) and I give permission for the researchers to hold relevant personal data for the period prescribed by the university.*

☒ I understand and agree to take part.

Appendix Seven Classroom Assistant Questionnaire

Section 1 Classroom Assistant Profile

This page asks questions about your personal background and work experience.

What is your gender?

Male	Female	Prefer not to say
------	--------	-------------------

What is your ethnic background?

Asian	Mixed Race
Black	White
Chinese	Other, Please Specify

What is your age?

Under 18	18 – 30	31 – 40
41 - 50	50 – 60	60+

This question asks about your work background. Please complete the following sentence. Please include in your answer the type of work, study or activities you were involved in. Before I was employed as a Classroom Assistant, I was...

How long have you been employed as a Classroom Assistant? Please indicate the number of years or months.

Years	Months
-------	--------

What is the title of your role?

Classroom Assistant	Teaching Assistant
Learning Support Assistant	Other, Please Specify

What type of contract are you employed on?

Permanent	Temporary	Job Share
Term Time only	Annual 52 Week	Other Please Specify

How many hours per week are you contracted to work as a Classroom Assistant?

In which school sector are you employed?

Controlled	Integrated	Irish Medium	Maintained	Voluntary Grammar
------------	------------	--------------	------------	-------------------

Section 2 Classroom Assistant Roles

This page asks questions about working arrangements and practice as a Classroom Assistant.

How many pupils with statements of special educational needs do you support in the classroom?

How long have you supported the same pupil or pupils?

Less than one year	1 – 2 years	2 - 3 years
3 or more years	Other please specify	

Which year group or year groups do you work with?

Year 8	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11
Year 12	Year 13	Year 14	

What kinds of Special Educational Needs (SEN) do you support? Please select only the conditions stated on the pupil's statement of special educational needs or IEP/ PLP.

Autism, Asperger's Syndrome	ADHD/ADD	Dyslexia
Dyscalculia	Moderate Learning Difficulties	Severe Learning Difficulties
Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties	Blind, Partially Sighted or visual impairment	Hearing difficulty
Multi-sensory impairment	Developmental Language Disorder	Social Emotional Behavioural Difficulties
Severe Challenging Behaviour	Other Please Specify	

What kinds of healthcare, medical or physical disabilities do you support? Please select only the conditions stated on the pupil's statement of educational needs or IEP/ PLP.

Asthma	Anaphylaxis	Anxiety Disorder
Acquired Brain Injury	Complex Healthcare Needs	Cerebral Palsy
Diabetes	Dyspraxia/ Developmental Co-ordination Difficulties	Developmental Language Delay
Down's Syndrome	Depression	Epilepsy
Eating Disorder	Muscular Dystrophy	Psychosis
Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus	Other please Specify	I do not support any medical conditions

How would you describe the type of support you provide as a Classroom Assistant?

	Everyday	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Educational - Support for Teaching and Learning				
Organisational - Support for pupil with tasks, equipment and resources				
Pastoral - Support for pupil wellbeing and personal development				
Social - support for pupil interactions with peers and teachers.				
Behaviour - Support for pupils with challenging behaviour				
Medical or Health - Support for pupil medical or health care needs				
Clerical - Administrative support for Teachers				

Other Please Specify

This question lists a range of duties undertaken by Classroom Assistants. Please indicate the duties which you most commonly undertake within the classroom to support pupils with statements of special educational needs.

	Everyday	Infrequently	Never
Assist the Teacher with support and care of pupil/s			
Attend to pupil/s personal needs such as feeding and toileting			
Administer prescribed medication			
Deal with first aid incidents			
Help with specialist communication skills and sensory difficulties			
Reinforce behavioural rules and expectations			
Manage disruptive behaviour in the classroom			
Manage disruptive behaviour outside the classroom			
Support very challenging behaviour			
Support pupil/s when upset, angry or frustrated.			
Support pupil self-management			
Complete child protection and safeguarding documents			
Assist with programmes to promote pupil independence			
Assist with programmes to develop confidence and self esteem			
Assist with programmes to improve attendance			
Establish a supportive relationship with pupil/s			
Facilitate interactions with peers			
Facilitate interactions with teacher/s			
Supervise peer supports			
Communicate with parents formally, e.g. at parents' evenings			
Communicate with parents informally, e.g. home - school diary, phone			
Support Pupils' Emotional Needs			
Encourage friendships			
Enable access to the curriculum			
Differentiation - adapt resources and materials for pupil/s			
Differentiation - prepare alternative resources and materials for pupil/s			
Provide individual attention to pupil/s			
Monitor 'on-task' behaviour			
Prompt pupil attention and 'on-task' behaviour			
Provide increased thinking or processing time			
Provide additional verbal directions or instructions			
Provide alternative explanations or examples			
Undertake note-taking or writing for pupil/s			
Undertake reading for pupil/s			
Encourage or motivate pupil/s to participate in learning activities			

Help pupil/s complete their work			
Help with assistive technology			
Provide exam access arrangements for pupil/s			
Promote independence through fading support			
Assist with pupil/s IEPs/ PLPs, documents, programmes or care plan			
Evaluate progress with IEP/PLPs targets			
Assist with classroom administration			
Assist with assessment data/ recording pupil/s progress			
Photocopy/ prepare lesson materials			
Feedback to teacher/s on pupil/s needs and progress			
Undertake Invasive Medical Procedures			

Please add any other that you think are missing from this list.

How do you support pupils with statements of special educational needs and how often?

	Everyday	Infrequently	Never
One to One support			
Small group support (2 - 5 pupils)			
Medium group support (5 - 10 pupils)			
Large group (10 - 15 pupils)			
Whole Class support (Moving around the classroom and helping all the pupils)			

Where do you provide support for pupils most often?

In the classroom at the pupils' desk	In the classroom in a separate location	Withdrawn from class in another location
Withdrawn from class in a resource base	Other Please Specify	

Are you involved in SEN arrangements for pupil/s? Please indicate your involvement in SEN planning and practice.

	Everyday	Infrequently	Never
Contribute to Transition Plans (Post 14)			
Read and understand the statement			
Attend annual review meetings			
Attend Parents' evenings			
Contribute to pupil/s report			

Section 3 Qualifications and Training

This page asks questions about your qualifications, training and professional development.

What is your the highest level of qualification? Please type the name of your course in the box beside the type of qualification you hold.

Qualification	Title
Level 2 GCSEs	
Level 3 NVQ/ Diploma/ A Levels	
Level 4 NVQ/ Diploma/ HNC	
Level 5 NVQ/ Diploma/ HND	
Level 6 Degree/ BEd	
Level 7 Postgraduate Degree	
Other Please Specify	

Please state any specific classroom assistant training or qualification you have undertaken?

Vocational Training	Online Training	School based Training
EA Course	Other	

Do you have any specific training in relation of Special Educational Needs?

Yes	No	Please provide details
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Do you wish to undertake further training for your role as a Classroom Assistant?

Yes	No	Unsure
Please comment with the training you would like to undertake.		

Do you wish to undertake teacher training?

Yes	No	Unsure
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How might you wish to develop your role as a Classroom Assistant in the future?

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Section 4 Classroom Assistant Support

This page asks you questions about the support you have received in school in your role as a Classroom Assistant.

What starting /induction process was in place when you started your job as a Classroom Assistant? Please describe the procedures and activities in place when you joined school, including the resources used and school staff involved.

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Have you had an appraisal or evaluation of your work as a Classroom Assistant in the last 12 months?

Yes	No	Unsure
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If you have had an appraisal, please describe the appraisal process.

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Please indicate your involvement in planning, preparation and supervision in school.

	Everyday	Infrequently	Never
Involvement in whole school planning such as staff meetings and development days			
Involvement in year group planning meetings			
Involvement in department planning meetings			
Involvement in meeting with subject Teachers/ Form Tutor			
Involvement in lesson planning and preparation			
Involvement in assessment preparation			
Discuss lesson plans with Teachers			
Discuss pastoral issues with Teachers			
Receive directions from subject Teachers in the classroom			
Receive directions from specialist Teachers about SEN strategies			
Receive supervision from the SENCO			
Receive supervision from the Form Tutor			
Receive supervision from subject Teachers			

Do you undertake any other paid or voluntary roles within your school? Please state the name of the role and a brief nature of the duties.

Paid	
Voluntary	

Is your job as a Classroom Assistant your primary employment?

Yes	No
-----	----

Do you have other part-time or seasonal employment? Please state the name of your other job and approximate number of hours worked per week.

Yes	No
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Please state the name of your other job and approximate number of hours worked per week.

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Section 5 Classroom Assistant Perceptions

This final page asks questions about your opinions and thoughts about your role as a Classroom Assistant.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am fairly paid for the work that I do as a CA.					
My role as a CA is valued by Teaching staff.					
My role is valued by pupils with Statements of SEN					
The boundaries between my role as a CA & the role of the Teacher are clear.					
I have the necessary qualifications to undertake my role as a CA.					
I have undertaken the necessary training to support pupils with SEN.					
I have had opportunities to undertake training for my role as a Classroom Assistant in the last year.					
I have appropriate time during school hours for resource preparation and planning.					
I receive appropriate supervision and support from the SENCO.					
I receive appropriate supervision and support from class teachers					

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither Satisfied nor Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
In general, how satisfied or dissatisfied with your job as a Classroom Assistant?					
In general, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the training you have received for your role as a Classroom Assistant?					
How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your involvement in					

planning and preparation for your role as a Classroom Assistant?					
To what extent are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the support and supervision you receive in school for your role as a Classroom Assistant?					

Section 6 Questionnaire Complete

Thank you for taking the time to share your views and experiences of your role as a Classroom Assistant. Your contributions are greatly appreciated by the researcher and have made a significant contribution to an important research project in an under-researched area.

The next phase of the project will involve a 45 minute interview with the researcher. This can be undertaken at a time and place that suit you. The interview will involve a discussion about your experiences as a Classroom Assistant in a post-primary school.

If you are willing to continue to share your knowledge, expertise and opinions, please provide an email address or mobile number, so the researcher can get in touch with you.

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Appendix Eight Semi-Structured Telephone Interview Schedule

Introduction

- Thank CA for contribution. Introduction and briefly outline the purpose of the research.
- Stress that there are no right or wrong answers. I might ask for clarification or ask for more information about a topic. Take time to consider your answer or response. Feel free to ask any questions for clarity on the research questions.
- The questions are broad so that they may be relevant to your experience as a CA.
- Ask for consent to record and use the data.
- Remind that we can stop at any time; and you can withdraw your interview from the research at anytime but letting me know via email or phone.

Questions

1. What are your motivations for working as a CA? or for continuing in this type of work?
 - School type or sector? Type of support? Type of pupil supported?
2. How do you see your role as a CA contributing to the inclusion of SEN pupils in a secondary school?
 - Has this role changed?
3. How would you describe your support for teachers? How do you collaborate in or outside the classroom?
4. In your opinion, how can CAs best prepare for their role in post-primary schools?
 - Is there any particular training, qualification or experience you have found most useful?
5. What contributes to your sense of job satisfaction as a CA?
6. In your opinion, what are the most positive aspects of work as a CA? What are the most negative?
7. Is there anything else you think is important about the CA role that we haven't discussed?

Prompts

Clarification – Can I ask what you mean by that?

Example – could you give me an example of that?

Elaboration – is there a particular way of thinking behind that approach? Can I ask how you might have come to think/ act/ provide support that way? Could be talk about that further. You mentioned X, Can you tell me a little more about that?

Thank you for your time

Appendix Nine Transcription Notation System

Transcripts should be double spaced with wide margin, identify both speakers and use numbered lines (Cohen et al, 2018).

.... Speech trailing off

- Cut of speech or unfinished words or phrases

Pause – Notable pause

((inaudible speech))

Emphasis placed on particular words as indicated by participants speech volume, tone or pitch

“” Reported Speech

Name __ changed content – identifying information

LOUD Expression *Quiet* Expression

Omissions/ Non – Relevant information not included in the transcription

Non-verbal sounds noted e.g. Laughter, hesitancy, coughing, etc

Appendix Ten – Examples of Reflexive Journal

18.04.2020

Braun and Clarke emphasise that this generation of codes involves active engagement of the researcher in the combination of codes to derive broader conceptual categories of themes which relate to the research question. The research question which I am attempting to address is 'How to CA experience and understand their roles as CAs?'

The first part of this question addresses the experiential aspects of the role – experience as a verb and focused on simple description. I am seeking to provide a description of reported action. Reflecting on my own assumptions about what characterised my own experience is important at this point. Thinking back, I frame what I was doing as a CA in different ways depending on different pupils I was assigned to. I think of the support that I provided to LB which when I think about was as a professional friend there to encourage school attendance, to troubleshoot and deal with things that happened in the school environment so she would come to school every day, I was there to observe her and report to CPO on the things that she said about food violence at home. Whereas with BMC support could be characterised as educational and focused on his learning, keeping him engaged and in the right attitude to learn/ preventing him swearing at his teacher. I think I am repeating what some of the participants have done, giving a description of duties and then follow this up with my understand of what this support mean to the pupils. A clear example here would be SNA1 discussed their proximity to and familiarity to students and how they felt this benefitted their pupils. The second part of this questions then is more implicit looking at the understanding of their roles – how CAs give different meanings or stress particular educational or emotional aspects of their work as I have done. It is fair be guarded against the assumption that all CAs naturally do this. An example so far in the transcripts would the differing opinions held about how they view the role and mentions of the different dilemmas in practice and examples of confusion.

05.05.2020

I took the data set which was coded and collated in Nvivo and I began to examine the different areas of focus for example, motivations and examine different motivations that participants offered for why they wished to work as CAs. Are there any any areas that I am overlooking in the data? I then reviewed all of the codes individually and began to combine them into smaller themes. My motivation was to work with neurodiverse adolescents in the school environment as a clear career choice, however it is clear within the collated transcripts that this was one of many varied reasons for working in this role. One key insight is that when I spoke of preparation for the CA role many CAs understood this in terms of their attributes rather than training or doing a course. Perhaps this is my assumption that CAs should undertake some form of training prior to getting a CA role. This is clearly not the case as patterns of response are coded so far with candidate themes relating to motivation – suggesting that attitudes or aspirations for the role are a form of preparation.