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## Researching the influence of teaching assistants on the learning of pupils identified with special educational needs in mainstream primary schools: exploring social inclusion

*Helen Saddler*

*University of York*

**Key words:** Special educational needs, SEN, social inclusion, teaching assistants, participation, social position, mainstream, primary.

**As a result of their high contact time with children, particularly children identified with special educational needs, it is widely acknowledged that teaching assistants (TAs) have great influence on pupils' education (Balshaw). However, recent research into the impact of TAs on pupils' learning has questioned TAs' usefulness in improving pupils' learning (Blatchford, Bassett and Brown; Higgins). This paper argues that TAs' influence on pupils' education has not yet been researched effectively. Previous research has primarily focused on determining TAs' influence on pupils' achievement in terms of academic outcomes and has neglected to explore social outcomes. Two interconnected literature bases are reviewed in this paper; the current research exploring TAs' role and influence on pupils' learning is first explored, followed by a critical discussion of the literature regarding the process of social inclusion in mainstream primary schools. This paper concludes that for TAs' influence on pupils' learning to be effectively researched, TAs' influence on the process of social inclusion must be researched within mainstream primary schools.**

### Introduction

From November 2010 to November 2011 alone, the number of teaching assistants (TAs) in England rose by 5900 (2.8%) to 219 800 (DFE, 2012, p. 2). This dramatic increase is demonstrative of the continuing rapid growth in the number of TAs. Both growth in TAs' numbers and their high contact time with children, particularly children identified with special educational needs (SEN), highlight TAs' prominence in pupils' education. Researching TAs' specific influence on pupils' education is key in recognising their prominence. This research should enable TAs' role and responsibilities to be more clearly defined in optimising pupils' learning.

However, recent research has questioned TAs' usefulness in supporting pupils' learning (Blatchford, Bassett and Brown

et al., 2009; Higgins, 2011). TAs' support has been reported to make little or no difference to pupils' attainment and, in some cases, negatively impacted upon pupils' performance (Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2012). However, the methodology employed in previous research is questioned in this paper. This paper argues that previous research has primarily focused on determining TAs' influence on pupils' achievement in terms of academic outcomes and has neglected to explore social outcomes.

TAs primarily work with pupils identified with SEN, pupils who are widely accepted to experience poorer social inclusion than their peers (Frederickson, 2010; Hall and McGregor, 2000; McLaughlin, Byers and Peppin-Vaughn, 2010). Therefore, it follows that effective research into TAs' influence on pupils' learning should explore TAs' influence on the process of socially including the pupils with whom they work. The aim of this paper is to review the existing research regarding TAs' influence on pupils' learning and explore the importance of recognising TAs' influence on the process of social inclusion in effective research.

This paper reviews two interconnected literature bases in meeting its aim. First, TAs' complex and shifting role is explored, leading to an analysis of the current research regarding TAs' influence over pupils' learning. Second, the concept of 'social inclusion' is explored, with particular regard to mainstream primary schools. A model has been developed to present the key concepts involved in the process of social inclusion. The model is then related to the existing research regarding the social position of pupils identified with SEN. This paper concludes with a discussion that brings the two literature bases together, to suggest further research in exploring TAs' influence on pupils' learning. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer primarily to the literature surrounding TAs' influence in mainstream primary schools in England.

### Key terms

Throughout this paper, the term TA is used to describe all support staff who assist with pupil learning. Therefore, this

includes higher level teaching assistants, TAs and cover supervisors (Devecchi and Rouse, 2010). Additionally, although it is recognised and explained in this paper that TAs undertake a wide variety of roles, the term ‘role’ will be used throughout this thesis. This is due to the requirement of all individual primary schools to devise specific contractual job descriptions for individual TAs in their school, involving prioritising TAs’ responsibilities.

As Vehmas (2010) indicates, it should be acknowledged that the term SEN is complex and contested. In 2010, Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2010) undertook a review of the SEN and disability framework. They discovered that ‘the consistency of the identification of special educational needs varied widely, not only between different local areas but also within them’ (p. 3). The current legislative definition of SEN will be used in this paper: ‘children have special educational needs if they have a *learning difficulty* which calls for *special educational provision* to be made for them’ (Education Act, 1996, section 312). Therefore, children are identified as having SEN in the current schooling system if they are on school action, school action plus or have a statement of SEN.

### TAs – a complex and shifting role

It is acknowledged that the role of TAs in mainstream primary schools is highly complex (Butt and Lance, 2009). Often, TAs’ roles are ‘blurred’ with those of the teacher, causing confusion between the pedagogical responsibilities unique to the teacher and activities constituting the role of TAs. Furthermore, understandings of the role of TAs are shifting. The most recent change in government has resulted in greater emphasis on school-level TA management. The Green Paper ‘Support and aspiration: a new approach to special educational needs and disability’ (DFE, 2011) specifically highlights this school-level approach by stating: ‘we will enable schools to make best use of the talents of support staff, by giving schools the freedom to decide how to deploy them and on their responsibilities and their pay.’ (p. 64).

In its document, ‘Working with teaching assistants: a good practice guide’, which is intended to inform school professionals, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) define TAs’ role as fourfold, involving ‘supporting pupils, teachers, the school and the curriculum’ (DfES, 2003b, p. 8). However, many researchers have found that the tasks required to be undertaken by TAs in meeting the four components of their role are too numerous to be completed within the constraints of the school day (Devecchi and Rouse, 2010; Gerschel, 2005; Hancock, Hall and Cable et al., 2010). The recent Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) project (Blatchford et al., 2009) identified six categories of TA tasks in schools:

1. Support for teachers and/or the curriculum
2. Direct learning support for pupils
3. Direct pastoral support for pupils
4. Indirect support for pupils
5. Support for the school (administrative/communicative)
6. Support for the school (physical environment) (p. 76).

The researchers found that by far, the greatest amount of TA time was spent on supporting pupils, approximately 3.8 hours out of the average 7.5 hours worked by TAs per day (ibid). It is important to note that methodological criticisms have been raised against the DISS report, discussed later in this paper. However, the review was comprehensive, involving 2318 participants from across England and Wales. Additionally, this finding is congruent with other English studies into TAs’ role and further highlights its multifaceted nature (Collins and Simco, 2004; Farrell, 2005; Hancock and Collins, 2005).

It is widely accepted that TAs’ role is primarily rooted in working with children identified with SEN (Webster, Blatchford and Bassett et al., 2010). However, the structure of TAs’ working with children varies across England (Butt and Lance, 2009). Historically, TAs have worked, virtually exclusively, with individual pupils identified with SEN, as part of what Gerschel (2005) terms a ‘key-worker’ system. This is characterised by naming TAs as the primary support, for individual children with statements. Justification for this approach is that TAs provide pupils with the individualised academic support required to work confidently (DfES, 2003b).

However, the ‘key-worker’ system has been criticised by Vincett, Cremin and Thomas (2005). They argue that this system frequently results in TAs over-supporting the children (usually identified with SEN) that they work with, precipitating ‘SEN Velcro-syndrome’. TAs become, ‘constantly focused on the child in their charge’ (Shevlin, Kenny and Loxley, 2008, p. 147). Consequently, some children become reliant on the support that individual TAs provide and lack confidence during independent working, termed as ‘learned helplessness’ (ibid). Although this is concerning, it should be noted that in recent years, TAs have increasingly assisted children in small group workings within primary classrooms (Gerschel, 2005). This reduces the instances of one-to-one support, therefore precipitates the prevention of ‘learned helplessness’ among children identified with SEN. Nevertheless, numerous research projects have shown that these small groups continue to primarily constitute pupils identified with SEN, raising concerns as to whether independent working is actually occurring (Moran and Abbott, 2002).

### The influence of TAs on pupils’ learning

In 2009, Lamb undertook a review of parental confidence in the *Special Educational Needs Code of Practice* (DfES, 2001). He conducted interviews and focus groups with parents and school professionals in eight English counties, involving just over 3400 participants. Lamb (2009) concludes that as a consequence of the ‘key-worker’ system, ‘too many children with SEN are missing out on the core benefits of quality first teaching’ (p. 30). He identifies that much of the teaching of children identified with SEN have been ‘handed over’ to TAs, leading to ‘the weaker teachers teaching SEN students’ (p. 29).

Lamb’s (2009) findings sparked the development of two recent research projects into the deployment of TAs in

**Table 1: Headlines concerning TAs' influence on pupils' learning**

Title and author(s)	Publication	Date
Teaching assistants fail to improve school results Paton, G. (2011)	<i>The Telegraph</i>	26th May 2011
Teaching assistants don't boost pupils' progress, report finds Friedberg, J. (2009)	<i>The Guardian</i>	4th September 2009
TAs: teaching assistants impair pupil performance Marley, D. and Bloom, I. (2009)	<i>TES</i>	4th September 2009
Teaching assistants blamed for poor results Paton, G. (2009)	<i>The Telegraph</i>	4th September 2009

assisting with pupil learning, the toolkit of strategies to improve learning project (Higgins, 2011) and the DISS project (Blatchford et al., 2009). Table 1 reflects their contentious findings.

Both reports announced that TAs' support made 'small or no effects on attainment' (Higgins, 2011, p. 27). Additionally, the DISS report claimed that 'those pupils receiving most TA support made less progress than similar pupils who received little or no TA support' (Blatchford et al., 2012, p. 323). Although these findings are of concern, it is important to note that they are focused entirely on statistical academic outcomes (Balshaw, 2010; Fletcher-Campbell, 2010; Giangreco, 2010). Little acknowledgement in the DISS report is given to the influence of TAs on the process of social inclusion, which is inextricably linked to academic achievement. As Black-Hawkins (2010) explains: 'the inclusion of a child in a school has little meaning unless s/he also experiences achievement, and that child is unlikely to achieve unless s/he are included.' (p. 27). If TAs' impact on pupils' learning is to be fully understood, TAs' influence on the process of social inclusion requires investigation (Hancock et al., 2010).

The primary method of data collection designed by Blatchford et al. (2009) was questionnaire distribution. A total of 2318 questionnaires were analysed, from primary, secondary and special schools across England and Wales. These questionnaires concentrated on determining the nature and characteristics of TAs' deployment, constituting information gathering on training, wages, hours worked and qualifications. The authors have been criticised for failing to gather substantial qualitative data concerning TAs' influence on the process of social inclusion, rendering their conclusions, to an extent, unreliable (Balshaw, 2010; Fletcher-Campbell, 2010). Only one open question was posed to teachers by the researchers, as to how they viewed TAs' impact on their pupils' learning. This is solely opinion based and relies on teacher recall and an unclear evidence base (Fletcher-Campbell, 2010).

Perhaps it would have been useful for the authors to have conducted single-child case studies on pupils identified with SEN. This would have enabled richer understandings regarding the effects of TAs' presence on pupils' learning,

in particular pupils' social inclusion within the school community. Additionally, it would have been useful for the authors to have taken account of pupil voice in the design of their methodology, as children 'are active agents in their own learning and are entitled, wherever possible, to democratic participation in research pertaining to their interests' (Ravet, 2007, p. 234). This would have provided the researchers with a greater evidence base in addressing their first research aim, 'to determine TAs' impact on pupils' positive approaches to learning' (Blatchford et al., 2009).

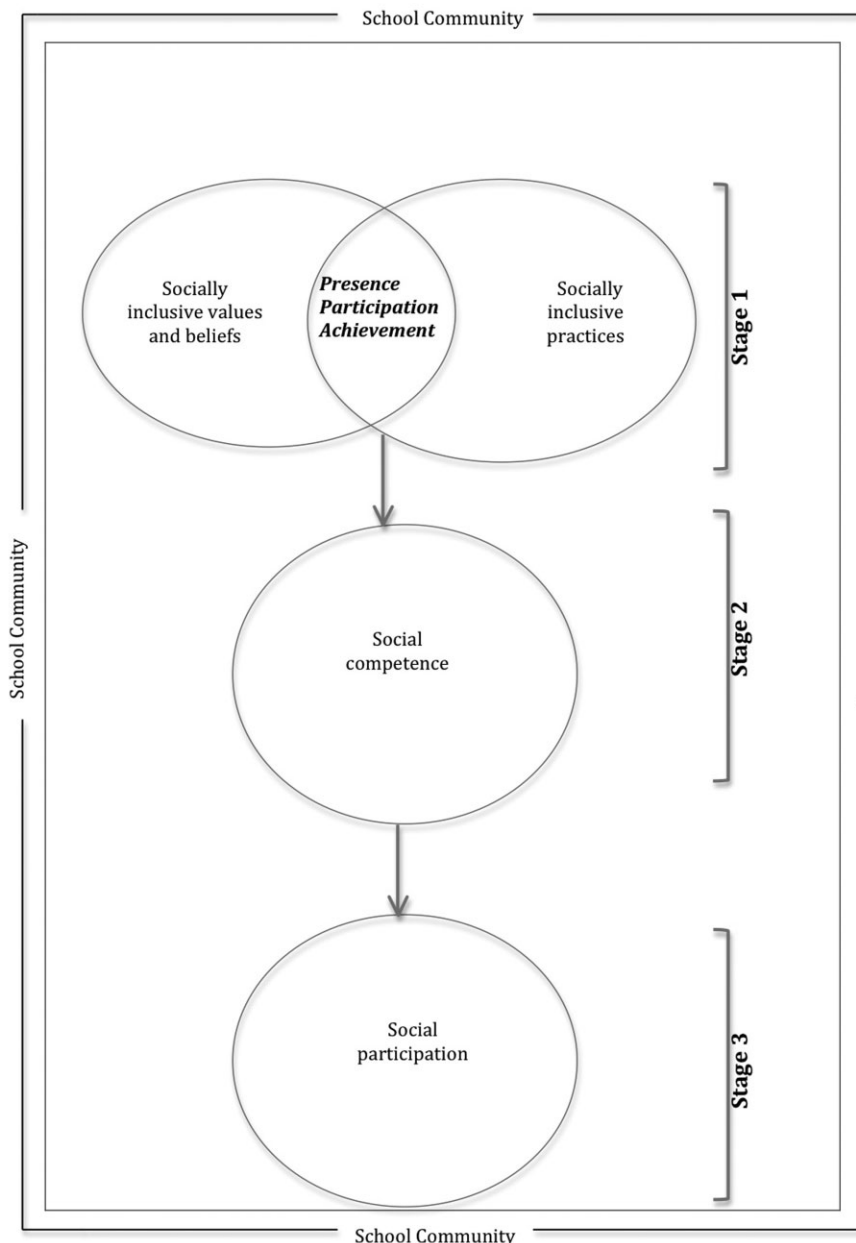
### Exploring social inclusion

If TAs' influence on the social inclusion of pupils identified with SEN is to be considered, exploring the term 'social inclusion' is necessary. The theory of learning to be addressed when exploring the concept of social inclusion is that of social constructivism. This theory emphasises the inherent social nature of learning, involving definite interplay between the learner and the sociocultural context in which the learner is positioned (Vygotsky, 1978). In order to acquire knowledge and facilitate cognitive growth, social inclusion within the learning environment is deemed necessary for all learners. Consequently, as has been previously identified, the processes of social inclusion and academic achievement are inextricably linked (Black-Hawkins, 2010). However, the process of achieving social inclusion within school communities is complex. Figure 1 represents the concepts to be explored in defining the term 'social inclusion'.

### Explanation of Figure 1

Kershner (2009) states that an inclusive education system depends upon 'identifying the cluster of values, beliefs and activities that succeed in maximising children's engagement in learning and minimising the marginalisation or exclusion of certain groups or individuals in the school system' (p. 52). Consequently, socially inclusive values and beliefs, to be held by all members of the school community, are imperative in developing a socially inclusive educational environment. It follows that, from these values and beliefs, the design of socially inclusive practices within a school should be facilitated. Additionally, socially inclusive practices inform the development of socially

**Figure 1: Model of social inclusion in a mainstream primary school**



inclusive values and beliefs. Thus, stage 1 of the model represents the necessary interplay between socially inclusive values and beliefs and the socially inclusive practices that they enable.

Socially inclusive values and beliefs can be thought to encompass three fundamental principles, identified by Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006): the presence of all, the participation of all and the achievement of all. These principles are intended as reflexive tools for use by schools when nurturing inclusive communities (ibid). They can be viewed as accumulative, one principle building upon another. Accommodating all children in a common learning environment (presence) affords the opportunity to act within that environment (participation), leading to gains in

academic and social learning (achievement) (ibid). The term 'learning environment' is used to denote the range of factors that affect the way in which learning occurs. More specifically, it is helpful to refer to the four factors that the DfES (2005) identify as comprising a child's 'learning environment': 'physical, relationships, structures and expectations, language and communication' (p. 4).

Ainscow et al.'s (2006) principles reinforce the strong relationship between academic achievement and social inclusion. Stage 1 of the model places these principles in the overlap between socially inclusive values and beliefs and socially inclusive practices. This is because the three principles permeate throughout stage 1; they underpin socially inclusive values and beliefs as well as the practices



designed for implementation. The school community must recognise and promote the three principles, so that school-based practices to achieve them can be designed and implemented (Hill, Davis and Prout et al., 2006).

In moving between stages 1 and 2, the arrows represent the process of implementing the socially inclusive practices, values and beliefs as identified in stage 1. Doing so then supports the development of ‘social competence’ among the members of the school community in stage 2. With regard to the children in a school’s community, social competence is defined by Odom and Diamond (1998) as: ‘children integrating cognitive, communication, affective and motor skills to meet their own intrapersonal goals’ (p. 10). It is important to remember that the intrapersonal goals to which Odom and Diamond are referring relate to both social and academic learning. Through developing greater social competence, pupils acquire the knowledge and understanding necessary to move towards stage 3 of the model, social participation.

Donnelly and Coakley (2002) state that ‘social inclusion is about making sure that all children and adults are able to participate as valued, respected and contributing members of society’ (p. viii). This definition of social inclusion suggests that the ultimate goal of providing a socially inclusive education system is to enable the participation of its members in society. Therefore, social participation is represented as stage 3 of the model. In mainstream primary schools, the goal of social inclusion therefore translates to the social participation of all, both adults and children, within the school community. The following definition by Ainscow and Booth (2002) is useful in addressing the concept of participation in the context of a school community:

*‘Participation in education involves going beyond access. It implies learning alongside others and collaborating with them in shared lessons. It involves active engagement with what is learnt and taught, and having a say in how education is experienced. But participation also involves being recognised for oneself and being accepted for oneself. I participate with you, when you recognise me as a person like yourself, and accept me for who I am.’ (p. 2)*

It is widely accepted that participation is a complex and elusive term. Pirrie and Head (2007) state: ‘the point, simply, is that participation is not a constant. The degree to which an individual (or indeed a group) participates can vary according to circumstances’ (p. 24). To explain further the complexity associated with the term, Sfard (1998) conceptualises participation metaphorically. She explains that the participation metaphor is conceptually distinct from the acquisition metaphor, in which learning is viewed as the development of concepts and the acquisition of knowledge. Instead, the participation metaphor suggests that the learner should be viewed as a person interested in partaking in activities, rather than engaging purely in accumulating knowledge. Sfard explains the difference as viewing

‘people “in action” rather than people “as such.”’ (p. 12). Therefore, for the remainder of this paper, the term ‘participation’ will be defined as viewing children ‘in action’, fully engaging in the school community, and not passively ‘as such’. Consequently, the concept of participation is integral to the process of social inclusion (Kershner, 2009).

The model is framed by the school community, in acknowledgement that the support of the whole school community is vital in facilitating the process of social inclusion. Additionally, the process of inclusion, by nature, concerns the involvement of every member of the school community; therefore, the individuals that constitute the school community frame the model. As has already been discussed, TAs are integral to the educational experience of many children in primary schools today. Therefore, it follows that TAs have strong potential influence over the social inclusion of pupils, particularly those identified with SEN. Taking account of this when exploring TAs’ impact on pupils’ learning is important. Additionally, determining at which stage, in the model, TAs’ potential is most significant could hold great benefits in the design of socially inclusive practices.

The appearance of the term ‘participation’ twice in this model requires explanation. The complexity of the term ‘participation’ has already been discussed in this paper; the term is used widely with various meanings. The term is used with different meanings in the model: in stage 1, it is used to describe a value and/or belief; in stage 3, it is used to describe an end goal. The term ‘participation’ appears frequently in the literature surrounding socially inclusive values and beliefs, therefore, it is inappropriate to omit or alter the term from stage 1. Additionally, the term ‘social participation’ as an end goal of social inclusion most effectively encompasses the components that define a socially inclusive educational environment.

### **The social position of pupils identified with SEN**

The social position of pupils identified with SEN is particularly poor (Frederickson, 2010; Hall and McGregor, 2000; McLaughlin et al., 2010). Frostad and Pijls’s (2007); research into the social position of pupils identified with SEN concluded that ‘pupils with special needs are less popular, have less friends and participate less often’ (p. 15). Although this study is Norwegian, it was conducted in 15 mainstream primary schools, involving 27 classes, therefore is conducive with the area of interest in this paper. It is important to note that difficulties in participating are not experienced by all children identified with SEN; Frostad and Pijls’s finding should be viewed as a trend rather than an absolute. Nevertheless, their finding clearly shows that children identified with SEN are disproportionately represented among children experiencing difficulties participating in the school community. It should be noted that Norway has implemented a curriculum for preschool children (ages 1–5) since 1996. Therefore, Norwegian children have different educational and cultural experiences when compared with children in the UK. The most recent Norwegian curriculum, ‘Curriculum for Preschool’, in place

since 1998, has a strong focus on social interaction. This may affect the relevance of Frostad and Pijl's research when focusing on the UK context.

Research undertaken by McLaughlin et al. (2010) identified that UK pupils identified with SEN are at greater risk of marginalisation than their peers. They state: 'children with SEN and/or disabilities are significantly more likely to be bullied or victimised than their non-disabled peers' (p. 47). This suggests that children identified with SEN are more likely to benefit from interventions centred on social inclusion. To investigate further the lack of participation and marginalisation of pupils identified with SEN, it is useful to examine the characteristics of the most common relationship formed between primary-aged pupils identified with SEN and their peers: asymmetrical communal relationships. It should be noted that the following section involves generalisation as only one relationship is discussed. However, the relationship that is examined is valuable in synthesising common difficulties in the process of social inclusion with regard to pupils identified with SEN. TAs' influence over these common difficulties could be investigated in effective research.

Frederickson (2010) identifies that the most common relationship among pupils identified with SEN and their peers is the asymmetrical communal relationship. This is characterised by pupils identified with SEN being 'looked after' by their empathetic peers without SEN. Pupils identified with SEN typically find it difficult to build friendships with their peers, as a result of poor social competence (Auhagen and Von Salisch, 1996). To clarify, they often lack the cognitive, communication, affective and motor skills required to form friendships. Frostad and Pijl (2007) found that 'pupils without special needs can be accepted by their peers without having a friendship, and can have a friendship without being a member of a subgroup, whereas this does not hold for most pupils with special needs' (p. 23). Therefore, it seems that as pupils identified with SEN are frequently unable to build friendships with their peers, they consequently have difficulties in building relationships of any nature (Frederickson, 2010).

This is reinforced by Frederickson and Simmonds' (2008) research into relationships formed by pupils identified with SEN and their non-SEN peers. Their research involved giving 142 children aged between 9 and 11 stickers to divide between classmates. They found that 'children with SEN and best friends were treated generously and rewards were likely to be shared equally with them' (ibid, p. 1069). A 'charitable' attitude towards pupils with SEN was shown through non-SEN peers sharing a greater proportion of the stickers (ibid). The children with the sweets did not share them with children identified with SEN out of friendship but as a result of empathy. It should be noted that this study defined pupils with SEN as children 'with a statement of special needs who had previously been educated in a special school' (ibid, p. 1062). Therefore, the 'charitable' model presented may

not necessarily apply to pupils identified as having less severe and/or complex needs.

To conclude this section by referring to Figure 1, it seems likely that many pupils identified with SEN are having difficulties in engaging with the transition between stages 1 and 2. It is suggested that many children identified with SEN struggle to gain the social competence required to build friendships that are instrumental in achieving social participation. There are two possible explanations for this. First, the design of the socially inclusive practices that are being implemented in mainstream primary classrooms is currently ineffective in encouraging pupils identified with SEN to gain social competence. Second, the implementation of these practices is, to a degree, ineffective. Researching the TAs' role in these two possible explanations is required.

### Conclusion

As has been discussed, concerns have been raised as to the effectiveness of TAs' support on pupils' academic attainment. However, it is acknowledged that academic achievement and social inclusion are inextricably linked. Therefore, TAs' influence on the process of social inclusion requires investigation in order to fully understand TAs' impact on pupils' learning (Frostad and Pijl, 2007; Gerschel, 2005). Further research could identify the key areas in which TAs' influence on the process of social inclusion is greatest. This should enable schools to involve TAs in positively influencing the social inclusion of pupils, particularly those identified with SEN.

TAs' pastoral role is particularly advocated as part of the *Every Child Matters* (2003) agenda, described as 'building rapport and relationships with students, effective working with outside agencies and creating a whole-school approach to pastoral care' (DfES, 2003a, p. 14). The pastoral relationship commonly built between TAs and pupils identified with SEN is important, due to reciprocal trust and respect and the time intensive rapport built (Devecchi and Rouse, 2010). It therefore follows that the strong pastoral relationship built between children identified with SEN and TAs could strongly place TAs to positively influence pupils' social inclusion. This would then encourage pupils identified with SEN to acquire the skills and understandings required to build friendships with their peers, and for their peers to build friendships with them (Wearmouth, 2009). Equally, the strong links that TAs often have with the school community reinforce their influential position 'if the TAs are well connected to the school community, they might be in an excellent position to support positive peer interactions' (Minondo, Meyer and Xin, 2001, p. 118). TAs' abilities to support peer interactions may particularly benefit pupils during transitions in their schooling, specifically between nursery and primary school and primary school and secondary school.

TAs are a particularly prominent and valuable asset to the current English primary school system. Therefore, it is important that their specific potential contribution to



children's education be realised. It is proposed that multiple case studies be carried out in mainstream primary schools across England to identify TAs' specific influence over the process of social inclusion. This identification could then inform the design of TAs' responsibilities and may reduce some of the complexities associated with defining their role. As the processes of social inclusion and academic achievement are inextricably linked, it is likely that improving the social inclusion of pupils identified with SEN could positively impact upon those pupils' academic outcomes. Consequently, TAs could be recognised in facilitating both pupils' social and academic gains.

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#### Address for correspondence

Helen Saddler,  
Department of Education,  
University of York,  
Block J2,  
Alcuin College,  
Heslington,  
York YO10 5DD,  
UK.  
Email: hjs527@york.ac.uk.

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