

***Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child,  
and Adolescent Psychology***



**A thematic analysis of the perspectives of Key  
Stage 4 pupils with special educational needs  
and disabilities on the teaching assistant  
support they receive for learning and wellbeing**

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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the Doctorate in Professional  
Educational, Child, and Adolescent Psychology*

# **Student Declaration**

I, Jonathan Porrino, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where the information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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# Contents

Title page .....	1
Student declaration.....	2
Acronyms.....	7
Abstract.....	8
Impact Statement .....	10
Acknowledgements.....	13
Chapter 1 – Rationale.....	14
1.1 Purpose of the research .....	14
1.2 Professional context.....	16
1.2.1 Increase in TAs .....	18
1.2.2 Importance of researching TA impact and effectiveness .....	19
1.3 Gap in literature and pupil views in research .....	21
Chapter 2 – Literature Review .....	25
2.1 Role of TA .....	25
2.2 Pupil voice .....	27
2.3 Importance of person-centred approaches .....	28
2.4 Models and theories .....	29
2.4.1 Self-determination theory .....	29
2.4.2 Ecological systems theory.....	31

2.4.3 Containment theory .....	33
2.4.4 Locus of control theory .....	33
2.5 Systematic search .....	37
2.6 Key studies.....	37
2.6.1 Deployment and impact of support staff in schools study.....	37
2.6.2 Special educational needs in secondary education study .....	39
2.7 TA learning support literature.....	41
2.7.1 Strengths of TA support for learning .....	41
2.7.2 Engagement .....	42
2.7.3 Understanding of work and peer support.....	43
2.7.4 Challenges of TA support for learning .....	46
2.8 Learning independence literature .....	48
2.8.1 Strengths of TA support for learning independence.....	49
2.8.2 Challenges of TA support for learning independence.....	51
2.9 TA support for wellbeing literature.....	53
2.9.1 Strengths of TA support for wellbeing literature .....	55
2.9.2 Relationships, belonging, and social inclusion.....	56
2.9.3 Confidence .....	59
2.9.4 TA characteristics and approaches .....	60
2.9.5 Sharing feelings .....	61
2.9.6 Challenges of TA support for wellbeing literature.....	62
2.10 TA support for wellbeing independence literature.....	65

2.11 Professional context and the role of educational psychologists .....	70
2.12 Evaluation of literature field.....	72
2.13 Summary.....	73
2.14 Research questions .....	75
<b>Chapter 3 – Methodology .....</b>	<b>76</b>
3.1 Participants .....	76
3.1.1 <i>Sample and participant recruitment</i> .....	76
3.2 Design.....	80
3.3 Ontological and epistemological considerations .....	82
3.4 Reflexivity .....	83
3.5 Materials .....	84
3.5.1 <i>Interview schedule development and pilot Study</i> .....	84
3.6 Procedure .....	87
3.6.1 <i>Ethics</i> .....	87
3.6.2 <i>School procedure</i> .....	87
3.6.3 <i>Interview procedure</i> .....	88
3.7 Data Analysis .....	89
<b>Chapter 4 – Findings.....</b>	<b>93</b>
4.1 Theme 1: TA support benefits learning.....	95
4.2 Theme 2: Dependency on TA support.....	103

4.3 Theme 3: Quality of TA and student relationship is important for success	115
4.4 Theme 4: TA support benefits wellbeing .....	123
4.5 Theme 5: Individualised and person-centred TA support .....	129
4.6 Theme 6: TA support is linked to negative social impact .....	135
Chapter 5 – Discussion.....	140
5.1 Research questions.....	140
5.5 Strengths of the study .....	153
5.6 Limitations.....	153
5.7 Directions for future research.....	155
5.8 Dissemination .....	156
5.9 Implications for practice.....	156
5.9.1 <i>Considerations for schools</i> .....	157
5.9.2 <i>Local authority and government considerations</i> .....	158
5.9.3 <i>Considerations for educational psychology</i> .....	158
5.10 Summary and conclusion .....	160
Appendix.....	163
References.....	202

# Acronyms

- CYP – Children and Young People
- ELSA – Emotional Literacy Support Assistant
- KS4 – Key Stage 4
- LSA - Learning Support Assistant
- SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
- TA/TAs – Teaching Assistant/Teaching Assistants
- UK – United Kingdom

## **Abstract**

This study implemented a qualitative approach to explore how Key Stage 4 (KS4) students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) perceived the one-to-one teaching assistant (TA) support they received for learning, wellbeing, and independence in these areas, with a focus on the strengths and areas for development. The students attended mainstream secondary schools in England. There is a paucity in the literature exploring pupil perspectives of TA support at the secondary school age level, particularly at KS4. This research offers useful insights for those involved in the planning, delivery, and review of TA support, including educational psychologists.

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve KS4 pupils in 5 mainstream secondary schools from one local authority in South East England. The students had to be in receipt of one-to-one TA support for both cognition and learning and social, emotional, and mental health needs, with the aim of promoting student independence in these areas. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

The findings suggested that TA support is associated with a range of benefits for both learning and wellbeing which appeared to outweigh the challenges, including increased engagement, learning understanding, learning task completion, and flexible approaches to learning. Additionally, the benefits of strong TA-to-pupil relationships were noted which inferred that TAs provided emotional safety and containment for the students they supported. The challenges included social stigma and peer separation. The data suggested that TA support hinders independence in learning, and a prominent theme



was student dependency on TA support for learning, characterised by over-support and a possible reduced sense of autonomy and independence when receiving TA support. There was a minor theme of emotional dependency on TAs through intense attachment to them. The findings from this study provide an understanding of how KS4 students with SEND perceive their TA support which may contribute to the improvement of this intervention for KS4 students with SEND.

## Impact Statement

This thesis implemented a qualitative design through semi-structured interviews to understand how KS4 students with SEND perceived the one-to-one TA support they received. The study focused on TA support for learning and wellbeing, and independence in those areas. The study also aimed to understand what worked well and the areas for development regarding this support. The students attended mainstream secondary schools in England. Although TAs are increasingly being deployed to work with children and young people (CYP) with SEND to facilitate inclusive education, there is a gap in the research around how students perceive this support, particularly at the KS4 phase of education in England. Previous research arguably focused more on the perspectives of other stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, and TAs. Therefore, this study collected solely pupil views to place emphasis on their voice which could be considered as underrepresented in this field of literature. Findings from this research highlighted the following:

- TA support was associated with a range of learning benefits which appeared to be more significant than the challenges. These benefits included positive support to promote student engagement, understanding of learning, and learning task completion. The benefits also consisted of TAs supporting student organisation and planning, providing flexible and bespoke learning support, and also acting as learning advocates for students. The areas for development included over-support and preparedness of TAs

- TA support was linked to wellbeing benefits which appeared to be more significant than the challenges. The benefits for participants included the value of a close relationship between the TA and pupil which appeared to provide access to psychological support and a space to share their feelings. The clear need for a strong relationship was apparent and possibly linked to increased student engagement with the TA support process. However, wellbeing challenges included social stigma and peer separation linked to receiving TA support.
- The findings around how TA support impacted learning independence are particularly important. The results highlighted a sense of dependency and possible decreased freedom due to TA support. There was a theme of TAs over-supporting students which may be linked to reduced learning independence. The challenges seemed to be more significant than the benefits
- There was a minor theme of emotional dependency on the TA linked to intense attachment on the TA. However, the data around wellbeing independence from the current study is limited

These findings led to the following key implications for schools, educational psychologists, Local Authorities, and government. More implications can be found in Chapter 5:

- It is imperative for TA support to be deployed through a person-centred approach. Students need to understand the role of the TA and consent to the

process. It must be meaningful for them and inclusive of their hopes and aspirations. Students and TAs must work collaboratively towards shared goals

- Schools must consider how pupils can be partners in their TA support. Their views must inform TA support at each stage of the process. For example, developing and agreeing how TA support should be delivered to ensure effectiveness and also being a part of reviewing the intervention and progress made towards their outcomes
- Government should develop national guidance for the effective deployment of TAs with recommended best practice and a requirement for TA support to be co-constructed with the student and delivered through a person-centred approach
- Local Authorities should consider developing systems to gather data from the whole borough/county to monitor the effectiveness of TA support for learning, wellbeing, and independence. This may then allow for areas of concern to be identified and targeted for support, for example, schools experiencing challenges with ineffective deployment. This is likely to then support Local Authorities in planning training for TAs at the whole borough level to address the identified areas of concern
- Educational psychologists are well placed to work closely with schools to promote person-centred approaches to SEND support. They must stress the importance and value of this method whilst ensuring that schools have access to appropriate pupil-voice resources and exposure to evidence-based methods to promote student voice, for example, person centred reviews

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# Chapter 1 – Rationale

## 1.1 Purpose of the research

What do we really know about how KS4 students with SEND perceive the one-to-one support they get from TAs? What do they feel are the benefits and challenges? The aim of this study was to explore how KS4 pupils with SEND view the support they received from TAs for learning and wellbeing, and independence in these areas. The study aimed to understand what the students thought was working well about this support and the areas for development. The pupils were in mainstream schools in England and received one-to-one TA support for social, emotional, and mental health needs and cognition and learning needs. They were also being supported to build independence in these areas. Pupil voice is arguably overlooked in the field exploring the impact of TA support on CYP with SEND (Alborz et al., 2009; Tews & Lupart, 2008). It is important to research pupil views for a myriad of reasons which are outlined in Chapters 1 and 2.

The number of TAs employed in schools in England has increased exponentially (DfE, 2015a; DfE, 2021), and research has suggested that TAs are working more closely with pupils with SEND and having higher levels of interaction with them than the pupil does with their teachers and peers (Giangreco et al., 2013; Webster & Blatchford, 2017).

There are mixed findings in the pupil voice research on the effectiveness of TA support for both learning and wellbeing, and these findings are presented in Chapter 2.

Additionally, there are varying perspectives around how effective TAs are in supporting

the independence of the pupils they work with. As TAs work closely with pupils, it is important that they are effective to ensure the students can develop both learning and wellbeing skills and build independence in these areas. There needs to be benefit for cost, especially in the context of austerity in the UK education system. Therefore, it is prudent to ascertain the strengths and areas for development of TA support, as doing so may provide valuable information on how to improve the support and promote student outcomes. Therefore, the current study aimed to identify such implications by collecting the views of pupils on the TA support they received for learning and wellbeing and independence in these areas.

The current study focused on in-class TA support rather than support delivered through formalised intervention. In-class TA support refers to the help that students get from TAs during teaching and learning. This can happen in a range of settings including in and out of the classroom; it can take place during learning at the whole-class, small group, and individual level. This is different to formalised, structured interventions which may also be delivered by TAs, for example, precision teaching, the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant programme, and Colourful Semantics to name a few. Formalised interventions follow a standardised procedure which arguably does not reflect the dynamic, ad-hoc nature of in-class TA support.

## 1.2 Professional context

Regarding the professional context to this research, this thesis is critical in the professional context of educational psychology as educational psychologists work collaboratively with schools to facilitate the development and progress of CYP with SEND. To promote student outcomes, it is crucial to emphasise the notion that CYP need to receive support for their wellbeing in addition to their learning (DfE, 2015; DfES, 2001; Webster & de Boer, 2021). As TAs provide vital support to CYP for both learning and wellbeing needs, it is imperative that educational psychologists are privy to comprehensive information concerning the effectiveness of TA support in these areas. Such information has the potential to help educational psychologists support schools in deploying TAs more effectively with the goal of improving pupil outcomes. The educational psychologist role involves promoting person-centred approaches and the views of CYP with SEND (DfE, 2015). However, a literature gap exists in terms of research exploring the perspectives of KS4 CYP with SEND around TA support for learning and wellbeing. Therefore, the present study aimed to address this gap by providing insight to support the educational psychology profession. Rationale for the importance of focusing on KS4 is explained in Chapter 2.

It is important for CYP to be supported in developing their independence in both learning and wellbeing, and the literature pertaining to this will now be outlined. The role of TAs in supporting independence is well established in previous government literature (DfE, 2011). Supporting students to be independent with wellbeing and emotional



literacy skills is described as an integral part of the TA role (Groom & Rose, 2005). As stated in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015), supporting CYP towards independence must start early, and the preparation for adulthood framework outlines a structured pathway for CYP to develop their independence which includes both learning and wellbeing dimensions. It is clear that there is a role for TAs in supporting both learning and wellbeing and independence in these areas. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE) outlines how there should be a particular focus on the preparation for adulthood framework areas from Year 9 onwards, showing the emphasis placed on independence shortly before KS4 and onwards. It is essential to explore the views of CYP on the TA support for independence at this phase due to how pertinent independence skills are at this point of education and beyond. Initially, the current study set to recruit secondary-school aged (Year 7-11) participants. However, the sample was narrowed down to KS4 as learning and wellbeing independence skills are arguably drawn upon more due to the emotional pressures associated with high-stakes testing (Wisby & Marshall, 2015). Therefore, there is a focus on building independence in learning and wellbeing to support CYP with SEND, particularly students with Education, Health, and Care Plans. This is important to help them in developing independence skills to cope with the academic and emotional demands of exams and the transition into adulthood (DfE, 2015). As one of the aims of the study was to explore how TAs support independence in learning and wellbeing, it was appropriate to focus on KS4 pupils for these reasons explained above.

### **1.2.1 Increase in TAs**

The school system in England employs TAs to support students with SEND on a large scale. TAs have been utilised in the UK since the 1960s and they originally worked solely in special schools for CYP with SEND up until the 1980s (Alborz et al., 2009).

Thomas (1992) argued that the publication of the Warnock report (Warnock, 1978) promoted the inclusion of CYP with SEND in mainstream schools, and that this report was significant in increasing the numbers of TAs in schools and changing their role.

Over the past 20 years, there has been an increase in the number of TAs employed in schools in England, suggesting that a growing number of pupils are supported by TAs.

From the years 2000 to 2005, the number of TAs grew from 79,000 to 147,000 in England. This upward trend has continued. From 2011 to 2020, the number of full-time equivalent TAs increased from 221,481 to 271,370 (DfE, 2015a; DfE, 2021).

Researchers have described this growth as rapid and unprecedented (Blatchford et al., 2011; Saddler, 2013). This increase is not only limited to England; other countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States of America have reported increases, suggesting that this is an international trend (Giangreco, 2010; Stephenson & Carter, 2014; Tews & Lupart, 2008).

The increase in the number of TAs has been attributed to the government's commitment to the inclusion of pupils with SEND in mainstream schools and recognition of the role that TAs may have in this (Howes et al., 2003; Navarro, 2015; Webster & de Boer, 2021). This commitment is evidenced in the Excellence for All Children: Meeting SEN

Report (DfEE, 1997) which highlighted the range of benefits of inclusion for pupils, such as social, moral, and educational. The SEN and Disabilities (UK) Act 2001a [SEND] further promoted the inclusion agenda and strengthened the rights of pupils with SEND to a mainstream education. Pinkard (2021) suggested that the rise in TAs was due to the shift to include more CYP with SEND in mainstream schools. Alborz et al. (2009) reported that TA support is one of the main mediums through which the inclusive education of CYP with SEND can be ensured.

In the late 1990s, CYP in England were being academically outperformed by peers in other countries (Reynolds & Farrell, 1996), and the government aimed to improve academic outcomes. TA support was recognised as a significant factor in improving these outcomes, particularly literacy and numeracy targets (DfEE, 1999a, 1999b). This recognition was then followed by considerable funding for the employment of TAs, with an emphasis on supporting literacy targets in Key Stage 2 (Watkinson, 2002). Also, a national evaluation claimed that in classrooms where a TA was present, the quality of teaching was higher (OFSTED, 2002). In summary, when considering these contextual factors, there are clear reasons as to why there were such significant increases in the number of TAs in England.

### ***1.2.2 Importance of researching TA impact and effectiveness***

It is important that TA support is effective to ensure learners can progress through education successfully and develop their independence. It is especially important in a context where TAs are increasingly being deployed to work with students who have

SEND, as students with SEND arguably face more barriers to success than typically developing pupils (Mitter, 2004). Research has identified a key challenge in that, worldwide, CYP with SEND are increasingly being taught by TAs (Blatchford et al., 2011; Giangreco et al., 2013). This is concerning because of the time spent away from the teacher who is trained to design and deliver quality learning. At present, no formal training is required to become a TA in England. Webster and Blatchford (2013) noted how, in the UK, one in five interactions between CYP with high levels of SEND are one-to-one interactions with TAs. Giangreco et al. (2011) reported that up to three quarters of the instruction given to pupils with SEND was from TAs. Data has shown a general trend towards increased pupil dependence on paraprofessional support (Egilson and Traustadottir, 2009; NCSE, 2018, & NDA, 2017). Lamb (2009) reported how the teaching and support for SEND pupils has been handed over to TAs. Webster and Blatchford (2013b) found that pupils with SEND are almost entirely accompanied by a TA. Bosanquet et al. (2016) noted how, sometimes, pupils with high levels of SEND work on a one-to-one basis with TAs, meaning that the TA is allocated to support them specifically as opposed to a group of students or being placed in a class more generally, and these students very often have an Education, Health, and Care Plan. Additionally, research has shown that TAs who spend most or all their time providing one-to-one support for children with SEND frequently work with these students away from the main classroom (Webster & Blatchford, 2013).

In summary, research suggests a trend where CYP with SEND are spending less time being supported by teachers and more time being supported by TAs. This could

negatively impact the quality of education the CYP receive in several ways, as teachers are arguably better placed to provide mediated learning experiences and task differentiation due to their teacher training and experience (Blatchford et al., 2016). Although TAs arguably bring a wealth of benefits to their role in supporting students (Chopra & Giangreco, 2019; Giangreco & Broer, 2005), it is fair to say that teachers have the training and qualification to meet the needs of these pupils. This is not to diminish the value and skills of TAs in supporting CYP with SEND. However, if TAs are to continue having high levels of responsibility in supporting CYP with SEND, it is prudent to evaluate their perceived impact in an effort to develop their practice to further promote student outcomes. Doing so is even more important when there are difficulties in deployment as highlighted by Webster and Blatchford (2013) which could impact the quality of SEND support provided by TAs.

### **1.3 Gap in literature and pupil views in research**

One way to conduct research on the effectiveness of TA support is by collecting and exploring the views of CYP receiving TA support, which the current study aimed to do. It is essential to research the views of CYP in this field as they are the ones receiving the support. It appears that previous research has largely explored TA support from the perspectives of stakeholders other than pupils. This has also frequently involved utilising quantitative measures to evidence effectiveness, such as academic progress in terms of examination results. Examples of this are highlighted in Chapter 2. It could be argued that exploring the TA role through quantitative measures may not lend itself to

providing a holistic account of the human experience of such support. This problem could be addressed by collecting pupil views through qualitative methods. Exploring their perspectives may help establish what is working well and what needs to change to improve the support, which was the aim of the current study. Highlighting student voice is considered one of the simplest and most powerful steps to be taken in order to better understand their views and experiences (Giangreco, 2021). Fraser and Meadows (2008) noted that CYP can offer intelligible and realistic ideas about the work of TAs. Rudduck and Flutter (2000) said that it is important to understand the experiences of CYP to then improve school systems (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000), thus giving further rationale for the current study's focus on collecting pupil views.

Unfortunately, in the field of literature dedicated to researching the impact of TAs, CYP views are underrepresented and understudied. Alborz et al. (2009) claimed that, in this field, TAs are thought to be the most common participants, not students. The voices of students have been described as uncommon and the most overlooked when compared to other stakeholders (Tews & Lupart, 2008). Although there are studies exploring perceptions of TA support which include pupil views, there is arguably an unbalanced emphasis on the views of other stakeholders such as teachers, parents, and TAs, and reporting often focuses much less on pupil voice. Rose and Doveston (2008) suggested the danger of pupil voice becoming tokenistic, and that although professionals can collect pupil voice with good intentions, the data is often not analysed and used effectively to influence change. There is a gap in this area of literature which is further highlighted in the literature review to provide rationale for the current study.

Although research has repeatedly reported the benefits of collecting data on pupil perspectives, the views of KS4 pupils on the support they receive from TAs are underrepresented. Researching pupil views in education has been identified as a useful mechanism to support the student sense of identity as a learner (Flutter & Ruddock, 2004), promote collaborative relationships between teachers and pupils (Fielding, 2007), increase the engagement of pupils in school (Cooke-Sather, 2006), and build the understanding of teachers around how their pupils learn (Mortimer, 2004). Effective communication is a vital component of successful inclusion, and this includes communicating with CYP to ascertain their views on what works well for them and what needs to change to facilitate quality TA support which may promote wellbeing, learning, and independence in these areas. Beaver (2016) reflected on their past experiences of consulting pupils with SEND, sharing that the students could problem-solve, especially as they matured, and were able to offer helpful insights. They also noted the positive effect on pupils when they had been consulted on decisions which impacted them directly, observing how the students were more willing to try new things if they felt their concerns were being listened to and action was taken to address them. Additionally, the need to regard the views of children has been reflected in guidance, policy, and law. For example, the Children's (UK) Act 1991 [CA] stipulates that it is a legal requirement for children to be consulted on and involved in decisions which impact them. The importance of consulting with children on decisions that affect them is emphasised in The Human Rights (UK) Act 1998 [HRA] and The Children's (UK) Act 2004 [CA]. More recently, the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) promotes placing pupil views at the centre of support through emphasising the importance of pupil participation in writing

Education, Health, and Care Plans and their involvement in discussions regarding their continuing support (DfE, 2015). In summary, the benefits of consulting pupils and taking action to promote their perspectives are well researched and are also prominent in legislation and guidance.

The broad aim of this thesis was to explore how KS4 pupils with SEND perceive the TA support they receive for their learning and wellbeing, and independence in those areas. Within this, the study also aimed to explore what is working well and the areas for development of this support from TAs. The next Chapter (2) provides a synthesis of the literature. Following this, Chapter 3 describes the methods. In Chapter 4, the research findings are reported. Afterwards, in Chapter 5, the findings are discussed, and implications and conclusions are given.



## Chapter 2 – Literature Review

### 2.1 Role of TA

TAs are known by various names both in England and globally. There are various terms which refer to the work done by TAs which include paraeducators, paraprofessionals, classroom assistants, learning support assistants, TAs, and special needs assistants (Gerber et al., 2001; Giangreco & Broer, 2005; Muijs & Reynolds, 2003; Takala, 2007). The definition of the TA role varies. For the current study, TAs are conceptualised as school staff in support roles who work mainly CYP with SEND (Webster & de Boer, 2021) to support their learning, wellbeing, and independence. The TA remit is multi-faceted and involves supporting learning and wellbeing, and independence in these areas. It is important to note that this definition is not exhaustive and the nuances of providing support in complex and unique contexts needs to be recognised. Throughout this thesis, the close link between learning and wellbeing is highlighted, as is the notion that supporting learning or wellbeing in isolation is arguably difficult. It is widely assumed that TAs will improve both academic and social outcomes (Giangreco et al., 1999). Social benefits are conceptualised under wellbeing for the current study; TA support is associated with wellbeing benefits which is explained in this Chapter. TA support has been linked to various learning benefits in the research field, including the development of literacy and numeracy skills, focus, attention, understanding of work, and facilitating access to peer support (Jackson et al., 2016; Jarvis, 2003; Mortier et al., 2010; Werts et al., 2001). Research has highlighted a role for TAs in supporting social

and emotional development by improving self-esteem, promoting peer interaction, and increasing emotional literacy (Krause et al., 2020; Webster et al., 2013), emphasising the duality of the TA role across learning and wellbeing.

The multi-faceted nature of the TA role may be associated with how it was remodelled under the Labour government in the late 1990s when TA duties were expanded beyond the inclusion of CYP with SEND to include managing behaviour (Bach et al., 2006; DfES, 2001). A modern-day conceptualisation of wellbeing, especially in the educational psychology profession, conceptualises behavioural challenges as wellbeing needs, a change which has arguably been encouraged the re-categorisation of social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties to social, emotional, and mental health needs with the introduction of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015). TAs are deployed to manage a range of needs including both cognition and learning, and social, emotional, and mental health in schools in England. Research has evidenced that behaviour management forms a considerable part of the TA role (Blatchford et al., 2007; Abbott et al., 2011; Blatchford & Webster, 2018) either through containing behaviour to reduce the impact on whole class learning, or supporting the engagement of an individual in learning (Wren, 2017; Slater & Gazeley, 2018). With the advent of ELSA interventions which are often delivered by TAs in schools, there is an increased focus on the role of TAs in supporting pupil wellbeing.

## 2.2 Pupil voice

There is not yet any study which explores the views of KS4 pupils on the TA support they receive for both learning and wellbeing, and independence in these areas, meaning that there is no available understanding in the literature as to the perceived strengths of this support, nor areas for development. Given the importance of pupil voice in person-centred planning, it is important for educational psychologists to be privy to such data to help them in improving outcomes for CYP with SEND, and collecting this information was the aim of the current study.

There is a strong evidence base for the importance and value of pupil voice in education, in particular, including their views to form the basis of their support. Wren (2017) argues that in much of the research on pupil voice around SEND support, adults are used as an advocate for CYP with SEN, but doing so does not provide an accurate picture of pupil views. Garth and Aroni (2003) compared the views of CYP with cerebral palsy with their parents' views around their experiences of medical consultations. They found that many children expressed their desire to be included in consultation around their care, but did not feel that this was happening. Gibson (2006) asked whether the lack of consultation with CYP with SEND in mainstream education might be one of the reasons why ensuring inclusive education is challenging, suggesting that pupil views might be imperative in circumventing barriers to successful inclusion. The importance of pupil voice is further highlighted through the UK government mandate around the use of person-centred approaches which is outlined below.

## **2.3 Importance of person-centred approaches**

There has been an increased focus on person-centred approaches since they were identified as a significant approach in supporting CYP with SEND in the Children and Families (UK) Act 2014 [CFA]. Adopting person-centred approaches to support CYP with SEND involves placing the individual at the centre of the decision-making process and considering their unique needs, abilities, and preferences. This approach emphasises the importance of collaboration between the student, their family, and education professionals, to develop tailored interventions to promote student outcomes in the following areas: academic, social, emotional, physical well-being, and independence. The approach also emphasises the importance of CYP views informing each stage of the process. This approach is based on the philosophy of person-centred planning developed by O'Brien & O'Brien (1989) in response to the limitations of service models which were seen to fail in recognising the autonomy and individuality of people with disabilities. This reflects the person-centred therapeutic approach outlined by Rogers (1957) in that if individuals feel they are considered within the intervention they receive, then they may be more likely to fully participate and maintain the effects from the intervention, as they work towards targets that are personally important to them. TA support is an intervention, and there is a role for TA support to be delivered in a person-centred manner; doing so could make the individual more likely to fully engage. These approaches begin when people listen carefully to the voices of individuals who have been, or are at risk of, being silenced. The values and assumptions underlying this approach signal a shift from the deficit model to one that focuses on improving the

ongoing consideration of pupil views, individualising support, increasing choice, and focusing on strengths (Mount, 2002). A deficit model focuses on the difficulties an individual faces rather than the strengths (Harry & Klingner, 2007). At the core of the person-centred approach is the belief that CYP have the power to shape the direction that their lives take. Research has shown that person-centred approaches can lead to better outcomes for CYP with SEND, including improved social skills, higher self-esteem, increased self-efficacy, and higher academic achievement (Cogn, 2013; Cumming & Muthukrishna, 2014; Stancliffe & Wehmeyer, 2014; Wehmeyer & Little, 2013). The value and power of person-centred approaches can be conceptualised through the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), both of which are explained below.

## **2.4 Models and theories**

The models and theories which are pertinent to the thesis are now described.

### ***2.4.1 Self-determination theory***

The first psychological conceptual framework to be considered for the study is self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This provides a relevant framework to conceptualise student engagement with TA support from a motivational perspective. Motivation is an emotional state which acts as an impetus, directing human behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory assumes that, for an individual to feel intrinsically

motivated, they must have autonomy, competency, and relatedness. These three factors will allow individuals to experience increased engagement. Within the model, autonomy refers to the need to feel in control of one's own behaviours and goals and have agency over working towards them. Competence refers to the experience of mastery and being effective in your own actions. Relatedness refers to the need to feel a sense of connectedness and belongingness with others.

Intrinsic motivation can be defined as having a pure interest and curiosity in something, meaning that when an individual engages their interests and curiosities, they then experience enjoyment and fulfilment; the individual engages because they gain internal reward and it benefits them. Gottfried et al. (2001) found that intrinsic motivation was positively associated with academic achievement. They also found that extrinsic motivation (engaging for external reward), was negatively associated with academic achievement. In the context of the current study, motivation is a key component of successful engagement with TA support. If a student cannot see the intrinsic benefit for them when they are being supported for their learning, wellbeing, and independence, then they may be less likely to engage, meaning the support may not be effective for them. Therefore, the findings from this thesis are conceptualised through a motivational lens to understand how TAs may be able to engage students in their support and promote pupil outcomes. The theory highlights the importance of the individual's views being considered in the development and the deployment and implementation of TA support. By adopting a person-centred approach to developing and deploying TA support, the individual's views can shape how TA support takes place and the goals that

the TA and pupil work towards; doing so should therefore increase intrinsic motivation, engagement, and autonomy, according to self-determination theory.

#### ***2.4.2 Ecological systems theory***

The second conceptual psychological framework for study is ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). This theory is pertinent as it provides a framework to understand how CYP's development can be influenced by the systems around them.

The framework consists of five different systems:

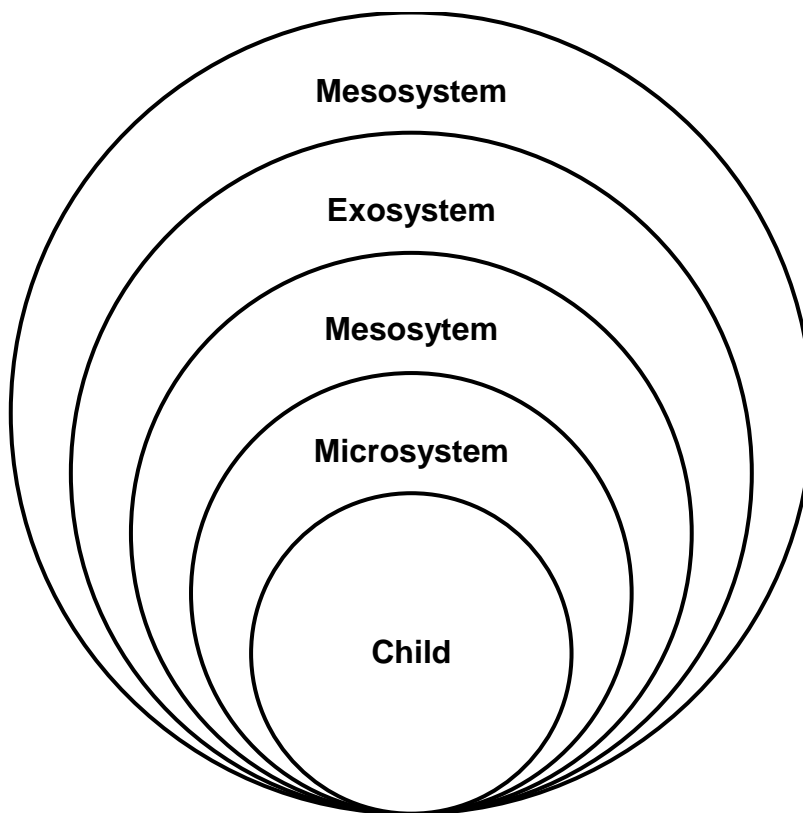
- Microsystem (the factors that most immediately impact development, for example, family, school, and external professionals)
- Mesosystem (the connection between the microsystems, for example, the parents and teachers)
- Exosystem (the links between settings that do not directly involve the child)
- Macrosystem (the wider cultural context surrounding the child, for example, the local authority)
- Chronosystem (referring to how systems change with the passage of time)  
(Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1988)

The microsystem is the most pertinent to the current study as this consists of school, so the TA support received by students which directly impacts their functioning. TA support can operate at the mesosystem as TAs can collaborate with teachers and parents/carers. Support from TAs can also function at the macrosystemic level as TA

practice can be influenced by politics at both the national and local authority level. It is important to view student development systemically to acknowledge the external factors influencing progress. This emphasises the idea that pupils are not only developing their skills in isolation, but also through support located in different systems, and by the very process of education and interactions with teachers and support staff alike. Figure 1 is a visual representation of the ecological systems model.

**Figure 1**

*Diagram of Ecological Systems Model*





The assumptions of ecological systems theory are essential in mobilising person-centred approaches. Ecological systems theory recognises the value and influence of systems around an individual in shaping their functioning and helping them reach their potential. The TA forms part of the microsystem, and as research highlights their key role in supporting the wellbeing and learning of CYP with SEND, it is important to understand how their support may already be effective and how it might be improved, with the view to promote the outcomes of CYP.

### ***2.4.3 Containment theory***

Containment theory was introduced by Bion (1962). The theory assumes that when an individual expresses their overwhelming feelings to another person, this person can help the individual to cope with them. They do this by receiving the feelings in a calm and contained manner and then reflect them back in such a way. This communicates that the overwhelming feelings can be processed and that the individual can cope with them. This theory was included as there could be an aspect of the TA role in supporting wellbeing which operates through the containment mechanism to help students cope with their feelings.

### ***2.4.4 Locus of control theory***

Rotter (1954, 1966) introduced the locus of control theory. The term locus of control refers to how much control an individual feels they have over their own behaviour. Those with a high internal locus of control have the perception that they have a high level of personal control over the outcomes in their life. They believe events in their life

are primarily because of their own actions. For example, a student may feel they did well in an exam because they revised extremely hard. Contrastingly, those with a high external locus of control identify external factors as being instrumental in an outcome. For example, a student may feel they did well in an exam because it was easy or the teacher was good. This relates to the current study as locus of control is linked to independence and autonomy. It could be said that there is a role for TAs in supporting students to recognise their ability to influence their own progress in both learning and wellbeing. By being able to acknowledge the control they have over their development, this could support students to feel more independent.

#### ***2.4.5 Psychosocial development theory***

Erikson (1958, 1963) proposed the psychosocial development theory to outline the eight stages of human development from infancy to later years. In the theory, each stage details a specific psychological challenge that individuals must process in order to progress to the next stage. By being able to resolve these conflicts, the theory assumes that the individual builds a sense of personal identity and becomes a healthy, well-adjusted individual. These eight stages are as follows:

1. Trust versus Mistrust (0-1 year): During this stage, infants learn to trust or mistrust their caregivers based on the consistency and responsiveness of their care. A loving and dependable environment fosters a sense of trust, while neglect or inconsistency leads to mistrust.

2. **Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt (1-3 years):** Toddlers develop a sense of autonomy as they assert their independence and accomplish tasks. Supportive parents who encourage exploration and self-sufficiency help children develop autonomy, while overly controlling or critical parents can lead to feelings of shame and doubt.
3. **Initiative versus Guilt (3-6 years):** In this stage, children develop initiative by taking on new challenges and exploring their environment. Encouragement and positive feedback promote a sense of purpose and initiative, while excessive criticism can lead to guilt and inhibition.
4. **Industry versus Inferiority (6-12 years):** During these years, children focus on mastering academic and social skills. Success in these areas fosters a sense of competence and industry, whereas feelings of inadequacy or failure can result in a sense of inferiority.
5. **Identity versus Role Confusion (Adolescence, 12-18 years):** Teenagers grapple with questions of personal identity and strive to establish a coherent sense of self. Exploring various roles and values helps them form a strong identity, while unresolved identity issues can lead to confusion and role instability.
6. **Intimacy versus isolation (Young Adulthood, 18-40 years):** Young adults seek close, meaningful relationships and intimate connections with others. Successful navigation of this stage leads to fulfilling relationships, while avoidance or fear of intimacy can result in social isolation.
7. **Generativity versus Stagnation (Middle Adulthood, 40-65 years):** Middle-aged individuals focus on contributing to society and the next generation, either

through their work or personal relationships. Those who feel a sense of generativity experience fulfilment, whereas those who feel stagnant may experience a lack of purpose.

8. Integrity versus Despair (Late Adulthood, 65+ years): In the final stage, older adults reflect on their lives and accomplishments. Those who have a sense of integrity feel a sense of fulfilment and wisdom, while those who have unresolved regrets may experience feelings of despair and bitterness.

This theory is relevant to the thesis because it provides further rationale for why KS4 students were chosen for the study. This is because, according to the theory, the 12-18-year-old age range, which encompasses the KS4 stage, is a crucial period for identity formation. In this stage (identity versus role confusion), the individual is thought to explore various roles to help establish their values and identity. It could be that working closely with a TA on a one-to-one basis during this stage may negatively impact identity development. During this time, the individual is theorised to be striving for a sense of individuality which may be compromised by working with a TA, which could then have a negative impact on wellbeing. It may be difficult for an individual to fully explore their identity and develop a sense of individuality when working closely with a TA for much of their school experience.

## **2.5 Systematic search**

To identify and explore the relevant literature, systematic and non-systematic approaches were utilised. For the systematic search, three databases were used: ERIC, PsycInfo, and SAGE. For the non-systematic search, Google and Google Scholar were used as well as considering the reference lists of relevant journal articles and subscribing to journal mailing lists. Full details of the systematic search in full can be found in Appendix A.

## **2.6 Key studies**

The key research exploring CYP views towards TA support for wellbeing, learning, and independence in these areas will now be reviewed and synthesised. First, some of the research documenting the challenges with TA support for CYP with SEND will be highlighted through two key studies.

### ***2.6.1 Deployment and impact of support staff in schools study***

The deployment and impact of support staff in schools study (Blatchford et al., 2009) aimed to explore how TAs were deployed in schools and the impact of support staff on pupil outcomes and teacher workloads. The government funded study was conducted over a five-year period from 2003-2008. Support staff included TAs, higher level TAs, nursery nurses, and therapists. The study was conducted in primary, secondary, and

special schools in England and Wales, with pupils in Years 1, 3, 7, and 10. The sample included CYP with and without identified SEND. The study was mixed methods, consisting of three strands:

- Strand 1 involved surveys for teachers, support staff, and headteachers/senior staff
- Strand 2 combined qualitative and quantitative methods including a pupil support survey (consisting of teacher ratings of the progress of supported pupils), a systematic observation component of interactions between TAs and pupils, and case studies based on interviews with staff ( $n=308$ ) and pupils ( $n=188$ )
- Strand 2 comprised a pupil support survey and structured observations of interactions between teachers-to-pupils and TAs-to-pupils

In terms of the findings regarding TA deployment, the study concluded that classroom-based support staff spent much of their time in a direct pedagogical role to the students. This exceeded the time spent assisting the teacher or the school. Support staff tended to have more active and sustained interactions with the pupils than the teachers, and the presence of support staff led to the students having less overall contact with the teacher and less individual attention from them. Teachers were mostly positive about the impact of support staff on pupil behaviour and learning. They felt the TAs brought specialist help to them and the classroom and had a positive impact on behaviour, discipline, and social skills. However, there was little evidence of an effect of TA support on distractibility, motivation, and disruptive behaviour at wave 1, which was the same for wave 2 at the primary level. However, for secondary pupils at wave 2, the additional

support had a strong, positive effect on these outcomes at Year 9. The findings from the pupil voice data were reported by Blatchford et al., (2008). From the pupil voice data gathered during semi-structured interviews, all the pupils were found to highlight the more personal nature of the interactions they had with TAs as a positive aspect of the support. They valued the personal approaches adopted by TAs (a more personal approach was described as less strict). In terms of academic outcomes for the pupils, the study found that there was a consistent negative relationship between staff ratings of how much support a pupil received and the progress made over the year in English and mathematics. The more support pupils received over the academic year, the less progress they made.

### ***2.6.2 Special educational needs in secondary education study***

Another key study in this field is the special educational needs in secondary education study (Webster & Blatchford, 2017) which explored the educational experiences of pupils with SEND in mainstream and special secondary education. The methods consisted of gathering data on each pupil's activities and interactions with teachers, TAs, and peers. They conducted systematic observations of pupils in mainstream ( $n=49$ ) and special ( $n=11$ ) schools who received TA support and had Education, Health and Care Plans and Statements (statements are the previous version of an Education, Health and Care Plans) and 112 pupils described as average attaining and without SEND, allowing for comparison of experiences. The pupils were in Year 9, so 13-14 years old. A survey was used to collect background data for both pupils with statements

and schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with pupils, their parents/carers, TAs, teachers, and special educational needs coordinators, to explore the perceptions of the structures and delivery of provisions, and the factors which facilitated or impeded effective provision delivery. Additionally, the researchers made field notes and had access to documentation for the pupils. Each researcher produced a case study report for all statemented pupils which drew together information from each method used.

One of the key findings was that pupils with statements and Education, Health, and Care Plans experienced education by being taught together in small, low-attaining groups. In such classes, there was at least one TA present in addition to the teacher. Themes around social stigma and confidence were identified. They reported that some pupils felt stigmatised by being in bottom sets. One student spoke of how their confidence was lowered when they had a TA supporting them in lessons where they felt like they were more able. They reported that they did not like feeling that they needed help. Another participant shared how they felt annoyed by TA support and thought sometimes they spoke to them like they were dumb. Another pupil shared their desire of not wanting to be seen as different, so they asked for help quietly or waited until the end of the lesson to request it. The findings also highlighted that where pupils were receiving high amounts of TA support, there was an increased risk of dependency on the TA or the TA taking on too much responsibility for completing the task. Some students expressed strong feelings around TAs providing too much help and eroding their opportunity to work independently. They also found that TAs are central to SEND



provision in mainstream schools and that pupils with TAs spend 18% of their time interacting with them, which outweighs peer interactions; this data was gathered from systematic observations. Additionally, the TAs described their role in varying terms including an advocacy and mediation role for the TA within school. This was between the student and the teachers and/or between home and school. The findings highlighted a largely negative view of the experiences of pupils with statements and Education, Health, and Care Plans who receive TA support for their SEND.

## **2.7 TA learning support literature**

Learning is a process which occurs in all aspects of life, and school is just one domain (Ackoff & Greenberg, 2008). For this study, learning refers to the process and product of being educated in a formal school setting, involving the transformational processing of knowledge. This is instigated by exposure to teaching from others, applying pre-existing skills to new situations, and developing new learning skills (Munna & Kalam, 2021).

### ***2.7.1 Strengths of TA support for learning***

The main findings from the literature on the learning benefits of TA support are now considered. These are engagement, understanding of work, and peer support. It is important to note that peer support and engagement may be considered as behaviours

which impact learning, rather than measuring the impact of TA support on learning through attainment as was the case in the deployment and impact of support staff in schools study (Blatchford et al., 2009).

### **2.7.2 Engagement**

Evidence suggests that TA support is linked to increased student engagement with learning. Engagement is also identified as a core component supporting wellbeing, highlighting the duality and importance of the TA role in supporting wellbeing and learning (Hills, 2016; Krause et al., 2020; Seligman, 2001). Krause et al. (2020) explored the impact of the emotional literacy support assistant (ELSA) programme. This programme was delivered by TAs to primary and secondary school pupils in Wales. The pupils reported being able to concentrate for longer in class and when completing tests after ELSA support. Additionally, they also spoke of being less likely to get distracted by other pupils. There appears to be an emerging link between TA support for wellbeing and increased concentration during learning. There is likely a link between increased engagement and wellbeing support, as suggested by Krause et al. (2020), thus providing rationale for the current study in exploring both learning and wellbeing support from TAs, as the two are likely not mutually exclusive. Jarvis (2003) supported the idea of TA support leading to increased focus as they found that deaf pupils perceived in-class support (such as TAs) as helping them to stay on task, suggesting an improved focus. Additionally, de Boer and Kuijper (2020) further evidenced this notion. Their study explored the voices of students with SEND receiving extra educational support who had

identified difficulties with learning or, as they were described, social-emotional and/or behavioural problems. They interviewed 72 students in total either in mainstream secondary education in the Netherlands, (13-16-years-old,  $n=33$ ), or vocational education (17-23-years-old,  $n=39$ ), to ascertain how they evaluated their extra educational support and how it impacted their needs. They reported that some students found they could concentrate better, leading to improved learning and grades. However, the strength of this claim could be disputed as only four participants in the sample ( $n=72$ ) shared this impact. Werts et al. (2001) found that TA proximity positively impacted the academic engagement of students; the closer the TAs were, the higher the likelihood of students being passively or actively engaged in learning. Although this finding was in primary-aged pupils, it was relevant to report despite the sample of the current study being KS4 pupils. It was highlighted as proximity was found to be an important factor in engagement. It is not yet known if TA-to-pupil proximity impacts the learning and/or wellbeing of KS4 pupils. Additionally, the impact of TAs on the attention of KS4 students specifically is understudied.

### ***2.7.3 Understanding of work and peer support***

One of the benefits of TA support perceived by pupils is how it helps them to understand their work. Jarvis (2003) explored the views of deaf pupils in Years 7, 8, and 9, from 25 mainstream schools in England on the support they received from TAs. There was a theme in the data whereby the TA would support the pupil to understand what the teacher was saying and the content of media in lessons, such as videos or

audio tapes, and this was done through repeating or taking notes. So, there was understanding in terms of interpreting, and additionally, ensuring they understood the actual concepts behind the learning. Furthermore, Mortier et al. (2010) also evidenced the support for understanding. They sought the views of six CYP with SEND aged 9-18 years old who received learning support. They found that students felt receiving support helped them have a better grasp of the lesson content through receiving additional instruction. It is not yet known from research if and how TAs support the learning understanding of KS4 students specifically.

The link between peer-supported learning in helping students to understand/comprehend is well established in the literature. However, it is not yet known if TAs at the KS4 level can facilitate peer-supported learning. Brock & Huber (2017) detailed that the primary characteristic of a peer support arrangement is the use of a classmate of a similar age, without SEND, to deliver an instruction to a student with SEND. The benefits of peer support can include higher quality peer interactions, increased time spent, and quality of that time, in the general education setting, improved communication skills, and more social connections. Effectively, peer learning support can positively impact both learning and wellbeing through inclusion in the learning environment. There could be a role for TAs in facilitating peer support to improve learning (Scheef & Lichte, 2022). Brock and Carter (2016) suggested that paraeducators could train peers to effectively facilitate peer support arrangements which highlights the potential for TAs to support with this. The TA role here could be valuable considering the breadth of literature highlighting the benefits of peer-supported

learning. Whitburn (2013) explored experiences of school inclusion in students aged 12-19-years old in Spain. They reported how many of the participants utilised the support of classmates for learning to both read and understand the work. Fredricks et al. (2019) also explored the benefits of peer-supported learning. They conducted a mixed-method study exploring the influences on learning engagement and disengagement of 22 middle and high school students. The students shared that their peers explained ideas when they did not understand and helped with homework. Although this research is not exploring the role of TAs specifically, it highlights the potential for TAs to support learning independence through peer instruction. However, the paucity of literature means little is understood about the TA role in facilitating peer-supported learning at KS4 level. More research is required to explore if TAs support the understanding of KS4 pupils, whether through TA or peer support.

More generally, a review of the literature also suggested further benefits of TA support on learning which included reading, money management, and getting a job (Broer et al. 2005). This study retrospectively explored the views of former high school students with intellectual disabilities on the TA support they received during high school (14-18-years-old) in America. Despite the rise in TA levels to support CYP with SEND, little is known about the perceived benefits of TA support from the students who receive it at the KS4 level and those in and around that age (14-16-years-old).

#### ***2.7.4 Challenges of TA support for learning***

In the current field of literature, it is clear that there are challenges with the TA role in terms of having a positive impact on student learning. Research has tended to focus on exploring the impact of TA support from the perspectives of other stakeholders and implementing quantitative measures to evidence effectiveness, such as academic achievement, and examples of this research are as follows. Firstly, increased TA support has been associated with less academic progress in English and mathematics over the school year than for similar pupils who received less support from TAs (Blatchford et al., 2009; Blatchford et al., 2010; Blatchford et al., 2012). Secondly, Radford et al. (2011) highlighted in their study exploring teacher and TA learning support that TAs linguistically and cognitively closed down learning. This means that there was a focus on task completion rather than supporting students to contribute to oral discussion. Oral discussion is referred to as opening learning up, and this was demonstrated by the teachers in the study. Generally, there is limited evidence available on how TA support impacts learning from the perspective of the students. By collecting pupil voice in this area, important information could be highlighted around how pupils experience interactions with TAs during learning. Such data could then have implications for the deployment and practice of TAs in supporting learning.

After reviewing the pupil voice research considered for this thesis, there appears to be a consensus of a more favourable than unfavourable view of TA support for learning. Nonetheless, it is still important to highlight the challenges to provide a deeper

understanding of the impact of TA support as perceived by the students who receive it. Webster and Blatchford (2017) identified a theme of TAs providing over support for learning. One of the participants, a school student, spoke of her difficulties with writing. She described writing at a slower pace than other CYP; she said the TA can make her feel rushed, as at times, they would intervene by taking over the writing. This suggests there may be a sense of added pressure due to the close proximity of the TA to the student. However, such pressure due to proximity was not reported in any of the other studies considered for this review. It is also important to note that this finding was only from one student in a large sample, and the student was in Year 9. The finding was still included for illustrative purposes to highlight the potential impact of TA support. It was also included to emphasise the lack of research exploring the perspectives of KS4 pupils. There is currently no available research exploring if and how TA-to-student proximity impacts learning in KS4 students.

de Boer and Kuijper (2021) explored how students with SEND in either secondary or vocational education in the Netherlands evaluated the extra educational support they received for their SEND. Although the consensus was that, overall, the students perceived the support to be beneficial, some challenges were noted. Some students identified that there was a mismatch between the educational support given and their needs. Therefore, from this study, some participants were showing an awareness of a potential lack of individualisation in their support. Although this finding provides an important insight, the study did not research the views of the pupils around how the support could be improved.

## **2.8 Learning independence literature**

Independence in learning refers to a CYPs ability to take ownership of their learning process, make decisions, and self-regulate their behaviour and progress towards goals without external support or direction (Broad, 2006; Wilde et al., 2006). It is a critical aspect of education which fosters lifelong learning and prepares CYP for their future careers. Research suggests that educators can facilitate learning independence through encouraging goal setting and self-reflection, providing student-led activities, and giving constructive and timely feedback (Cheng et al., 2017; Pintrich, 2004). According to socio-cultural theory, children's learning is initially a collaborative process with adults or peers. However, as children develop, they gradually become more independent and autonomous in their learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Studies have shown that learning independence has numerous benefits for CYP, including increased motivation, self-confidence, and engagement in the learning process (Ferrer-Cascales et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2018). Independent learners are thought to be more adaptable to new learning environments and challenges, possibly making them more likely to achieve academic success (Kumar, 2013). Independent learning is described as an essential component for higher education, in particular, creativity, lifelong skills for learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Brew, 2013; EUA, 2015). Research by Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) found that independent learning is a key factor in developing more meaningful approaches to



learning through a focus on the understanding and integration of knowledge. Subsequently, independent learning has been associated with higher levels of achievement in academia as well as increased motivation for, and engagement, in learning (Kember et al., 2008).

In summary, learning independence is a critical component of education for CYP. TAs are seemingly well-placed to prepare students for lifelong learning and success in their future careers due to the duality of their roles in both independence and learning. However, it is not yet known how TAs support learning independence in KS4 students, and there is a gap in this area of literature in terms of studies exploring stakeholder perspectives of this, especially the views of the pupils themselves.

### ***2.8.1 Strengths of TA support for learning independence***

The research exploring pupil perspectives of how TA support facilitates independence in learning is sparse, and in the little research available, the consensus appears to be that TA support presents more challenges for learning independence than benefits. However, there are some important findings to be highlighted in terms of how TA support may be linked to increased learning independence, and these studies detail the importance of fading support, proximity of TA to student, and boundaries. The strategy of fading support is documented as being supportive of increasing student independence in learning. Scheef and Lichte (2022) explained this as being a gradual reduction in prompts for a specific behaviour with the view to reduce the dependency of

the student to rely on such prompts to display the behaviour. Radford et al. (2015) noted how, if fading is successful, then the responsibility is transferred to the student.

However, it was noted that the research on fading paraeducator support is limited (Cengher et al., 2017). Broer et al. (2005) identified a theme in their findings whereby a small number of respondents had experienced the fading of such support, and that the participants shared their experiences of successful fading with excitement and pride, suggesting a recognition of developing independence and the importance of this.

In terms of proximity of the TA to the student, Hemmingsson et al. (2003) explored the views of seven pupils with physical disabilities aged 7-15 years old who attended compulsory schooling in Sweden. They collected data through field observations and planned semi-structured interviews and informal interviews with teachers and pupils. Using observational data, the researchers highlighted how the assistant ensured they sat outside of the group of pupils during lessons, with the greater proximity between the student and assistant signalling that pupils were expected to manage by themselves for the task. The assistant remained close by, prepared to support if necessary, but did not intervene unless asked by the pupil. Although the study did not explore the impact of TA support on independence, it highlighted how TA support can be deployed with boundaries to possibly convey the idea that the student is expected to manage themselves during learning, with the option of help from an assistant being available. Webster and Blatchford (2017) described the fading method of TA support to be a more effective expression of how TAs can work with students, leaving space for pupils to attempt tasks.

### ***2.8.2 Challenges of TA support for learning independence***

There is a theme in the research where participants reported feeling over supported by TAs which can compromise learning independence. From their study on the experiences of deaf pupils working with support assistants in mainstream schools, Jarvis (2003) found that students felt over supported at times. The students suggested that the reasons for this were possibly that TAs felt they had to ensure students were always on task and/or were intervening out of boredom. One student spoke of how they felt nagged by the TA who would ask questions frequently, and another pupil shared that the TA would intervene despite asking if the student needed help and the pupil saying no. In agreement with this finding, Broer et al. (2005) documented how some students reported that the TA became involved at an inappropriate point. For example, when the student was still completing work and support was not needed, and also with the TA doing the work for the student. The theme of the TA doing the work for the student was the most common one among the participants.

There are some studies where students described examples of the TA giving too much support. These findings were conceptualised as impacting learning independence negatively by the authors. Another way in which TAs may over-support learning and negatively impact learning independence is through excessive proximity to the student. Giangreco and Doyle (2002) noted that when paraprofessionals support CYP with a disability, it is unsurprising that they are in close proximity to said pupil, and that, sometimes, such proximity is warranted to ensure safety, give learning instruction, and

provide personal care. However, problems arise when this proximity is unnecessary or excessive. Again, in the study by Broer et al. (2005), a common experience was participants sharing their frustrations at the constancy of TA support as they often spent a large amount of time with them. They shared a desire to be independent, with one describing how they felt they were being babysat. Additionally, the researchers identified the strongest theme in their data to be around TAs doing the work for the students, with one participant summarising that this was the strategy that the TA used to help the student keep up with the class. This is important because it suggests a focus on task completion rather than learning, linking back to findings by Radford et al. (2011) around how TAs can close down learning. It must be noted that the study by Broer et al. sampled participants in Year 5 and 8 which is outside of the current study's target age range. No studies were found which focused specifically on the KS4 age range. Studies containing samples around this age range were included in the review for illustrative purposes to demonstrate TA impact and the paucity of literature in these areas. Although there are emerging links between TA support and learning dependency, particularly through over-supporting students as demonstrated in some of the aforementioned literature, much is unknown about how KS4 students with SEND perceive their TA support for learning and learning independence as there is no one such study focusing on this select group.

The TA support role is complex, and the need for students to experience a level of autonomy is required to facilitate effective learning support (Jarvis, 2003). Skär and Tamm (2001) reported from a sample of CYP between 8-19-years-old with restricted

mobility that many students felt they were not listened to by their TAs, resulting in a lack of autonomy due to having little control over the support they received. Failing to consider pupil views when delivering TA support could reduce the sense of autonomy in the student. Autonomy is a key component in facilitating intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and without this, an individual can feel less motivated to engage. In the context of a TA support relationship, this could hinder a student's engagement in learning support, thus impacting learning.

## **2.9 TA support for wellbeing literature**

Wellbeing is arguably a multileveled and complex social construct which has been described as a desirable state of being or existence that individuals strive for (Jones-Devitt, 2011). McCallum and Price (2016) argued that everyone has a right to wellbeing and that everyone seemingly aims for this. There appears to be no general agreement on the definition of wellbeing in the literature. Identifying an agreed definition of wellbeing and consensus as to how wellbeing can be achieved and maintained is challenging. It has been said that the term itself is often poorly defined and under-theorised (Camfield et al., 2009). Bradburn (1969) defined wellbeing as having an excess of positivity (positive affect), for example, happiness and satisfaction, over negative affect. However, Shah and Marks (2004) contrasted this with the view that wellbeing is simply more than just positive affect. Wellbeing encompasses feelings of fulfilment and personal development which echoes the self-actualisation aspect of the hierarchy of needs model (Maslow, 1943, 1954). The model theorises that individuals

move through a set of motivations that are set in a hierarchy and are based on both psychological and physiological needs. These needs are as follows: physiological, safety, belongingness, love, self-esteem, and self-actualisation. They are activated in a hierarchical manner (Kaur, 2013) and Maslow stated that the base needs (physiological) must be satisfied before moving onto the higher-level needs, with the highest being self-actualisation.

Wellbeing can also be conceptualised through ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). McCallum and Price (2016) proposed a systemic definition of wellbeing by acknowledging its diversity and fluidity. They said individual, family, and community beliefs and values influence wellbeing. Experiences, opportunities, culture, and contexts change over time which also impact wellbeing. They argue that wellbeing encompasses interwoven influences which are both collective and individual. Ryff (2014; 2018; 2019) configured a composite and multidimensional model of wellbeing which includes autonomy and environmental mastery. Relating to the current study, this applies to students in terms of being able to master their school experience. This model highlighted the role of autonomy in wellbeing, particularly through the individual's ability to master their environment. Within this model, autonomy is considered an integral wellbeing construct as it links positive functioning to the individual's ability to maintain their individuality across contexts. This relates to the current study as it could be that receiving TA support impacts individuality, especially when considering social inclusion which is explained further ahead.

Considering both ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) and the hierarchy of needs model (Maslow, 1943, 1954), wellbeing is conceptualised as a multi-faceted concept for the current project. Wellbeing is the personal experience of affect and psychological functioning, consisting of one's emotional state and general outlook on life. This consists of such as one's purpose, direction, autonomy, mastery, sense of independence, satisfaction, emotional health, resilience, autonomy, relationships, and self-acceptance (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Diener, 2012; Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020; Ryff, 1989). The current study's definition of wellbeing acknowledges systemic influences as it could be said that wellbeing is not only driven by internal forces, but also through external influences and context. To omit the systemic influence on wellbeing arguably denies the interaction between the individual and their environment, and the natural emotional responses which are integral to human nature.

### ***2.9.1 Strengths of TA support for wellbeing literature***

In terms of the little research available, the literature reflects that students in receipt of TA support largely report a positive impact on their wellbeing, with fewer reports of the challenges faced. The research highlighting the wellbeing benefits of TA support will now be outlined.

### ***2.9.2 Relationships, belonging, and social inclusion***

TAs have an important role in supporting relationships, both between themselves and the students they work with, and supporting the students to connect with their peers. Forming positive relationships is identified as an important component in wellbeing (Krause et al. 2020; NEF, 2009). Positive peer relationships are associated with improved wellbeing outcomes for CYP, including decreased depression and anxiety, and higher self-esteem. Relationships have also been linked to higher social inclusion for CYP with SEND (Kasari et al., 2012; Laursen & Hartup, 2002; Masten et al., 2005; Vyrastekova, 2021). Hemmingson et al. (2003) found that assistants who were available at breaktime were supportive of social interaction and were observed inviting other students to participate in games the pupil they supported. It is important to note that this finding was observational and not from the views of the student themselves.

Research has identified how positive relationships with peers can promote emotional regulation and social skills in children (Lemerise & Arsenio, 2000; Murray-Close et al., 2007). It is clear that there is an inextricable link between learning and wellbeing and further research has found that CYP with supportive friendships can experience positive school-related outcomes, such as increased academic performance and school attendance, and reduced rates of difficulties with behaviour (Egan & Perry, 1998; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). This provides further rationale for the aim of the current study in exploring both learning and wellbeing. If an attempt were made to focus on one, important data may be missed, and exploring both areas arguably provides a more



holistic perspective of TA support. Research has identified a positive correlation between perceived sense of belonging in pupils with SEND and their relationships with TAs (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019). Positive relationships with school staff can increase the student's sense of comfort in the relationship, and one particular study has highlighted that some pupils said they would only feel comfortable reporting bullying to staff they felt comfortable with, thus highlighting a protective role of strong relationships with staff (Saggers, 2015).

Krause et al. (2020) explored the effectiveness of ELSA support on primary and secondary students from the perspectives of the pupils. They collected data through semi-structured interviews and used thematic analysis to interpret data. The participants ( $n=13$ ) were aged between 5-16-years-old. The theme of relationships was prominent in the data, suggesting that ELSA support had a positive impact on the students' relationships with friends, peers, school staff, and family. The sub-themes were around resolving conflict relationships, strengthening relationships, and closeness with the ELSA. Closeness was one of the strongest subthemes, and one pupil shared how they wanted to have ELSA support all the way until the end of school due to how supportive she was. Following on from this, there was a theme around having a sense of safety in the relationship with the ELSA, and the sessions provided the students with a safe and positive space. Emotional safety is a key component of healthy relationships (Gottman et al., 2014). Whitaker et al. (2016) suggested that emotional safety is an essential aspect of effective school-based interventions in promoting the positive social-emotional development of CYP. Pupils expressed that the sessions helped them to manage

challenges with peers and friends, supporting them with conflict management. The support also helped the students reduce the number of times they felt angry, which again highlights the inseparable link between strong relationships and increased wellbeing. It is clear from this study that TAs, through ELSA support, can facilitate social connections, and the facilitation of social skills and providing assistance for interactions with peers has been identified as a positive and promising role for paraprofessional support in schools (Giangreco et al. 1997). Tews & Lupart (2008) found that students felt paraprofessional support assisted with social inclusion, however, the mechanism behind this was not noted in the research report.

In terms of evaluating the Krause et al. (2020) study, a potential limitation is that the positive answers could reflect social desirability. The students were asked personal questions around their wellbeing, they could have provided inaccurate answers due to feeling uncomfortable talking about possibly sensitive and personal issues, and this is important to reflect on when planning research in this area. However, a strength is that the methods included visual supports to facilitate rich data collection; this is positive as previous research suggested that children often find it difficult to articulate views verbally (NEF, 2009). The research on ELSA effectiveness was included because, in the study, the ELSA support was delivered by TAs, highlighting a role for TAs in supporting wellbeing through structured intervention. The ELSA role is, however, a separate intervention, and little is known about how TAs support both learning and wellbeing simultaneously, especially in the classroom. Additionally, the role of TAs in

facilitating relationships between students and peers is understudied as well as the impact of the TA to student relationship on wellbeing and learning.

### **2.9.3 Confidence**

Confidence is an important predictor of wellbeing and it is helpful to consider the role that TAs may have in supporting students with this. Krause et al. (2020) evidenced a link between ELSA support and increased confidence. They found that the ELSA intervention was viewed by the participants to have a positive effect on developing resilience, including a positive sense of self, and this view was also shared by head teachers and ELSAs. de Boer and Kuijper (2021) noted that when participants were asked to evaluate the impact of their paraprofessional support, a prominent theme was around how the support increased their confidence and self-image. There is an emerging theme around how TA support increases pupil confidence, and it would be helpful to understand if this is the case for KS4 pupils as well as this is relatively unknown in this field of literature. Confidence is important at any stage of education. The additional stresses of KS4, such as examinations and transitions to the next phase of education, arguably draw heavily on the confidence of students, so it is imperative that research explores how to develop confidence in KS4 pupils, and what role TAs can have in doing so, if any, as such literature does not yet exist.

#### **2.9.4 TA characteristics and approaches**

In the limited research available, there appears to be an emerging theme around the importance of the characteristics and approach of those delivering support to CYP with SEND. Tews & Lupart (2008) reported that when students were asked to evaluate their paraprofessional support, there was a theme relating to the characteristics and approach of the professional. General responses included that the TA was nice and that having them around made the students feel good, with one individual sharing that the professional made them feel special.

Whitburn (2013) highlighted the importance of the paraprofessional's approach to support in their study exploring paraprofessional support of secondary school students with visual impairments in Australia. They noted how an authoritarian approach was a point of contention, and that authoritarian TAs disrupted the autonomy of the students in the study through overcompensating in support and assuming responsibility for their learning. It is clear from self-determination theory and supporting research that autonomy is important in fostering engagement and motivation, so there could be a link here between TA approach and characteristics with pupil motivation to engage with TA support. It is also evident that a sense of autonomy is linked to wellbeing as explained in the definition of wellbeing previously. From the study, it is clear that the personality and characteristics of the TA are important and may directly impact student engagement with TA support.

### **2.9.5 Sharing feelings**

From the research, it appears that providing emotional support for CYP is an important aspect of the TA role according to pupils. de Boer and Kuijper (2021) documented these positive aspects. Students shared that they felt able to discuss their problems with the support assistant, and one student shared how she felt that the support assistant understood and listened to them. Overall, receiving time and attention from someone was also a benefit identified by the participants. Dillon et al. (2016) investigated the self-reported school experiences of 14 autistic pupils in mainstream secondary schools in the UK and 14 age and gender matched students who were not autistic. The students in the study voiced their appreciation of the support staff working in the inclusion and SEND areas of the school, with one pupil commenting that they listen to them and understand them. Krause et al. (2020) identified the importance of talk between the ELSA and the student in supporting student wellbeing. The theme of talk was prominent in their data, and findings highlighted that the process of pupils talking to the ELSA could be a way for them to cope with challenging situations. Research by Hills (2016) identified that talking was an excellent way for students to share their feelings, and then manage, express, and alter them. It could be said that there is an element of reassurance provided when pupils share their feelings, and the role of the TA in providing reassurance has been described as critical to their remit (Zhao et al. 2021). In summary, there appears to be a wellbeing benefit for students who are able to share/talk their feelings with TAs. There are some emerging themes as to why sharing feelings with TAs may be helpful, for example, accessing reassurance. However, the

findings are sparse in the literature reviewed for the current study. Addressing this research gap could provide a deeper understanding on the effectiveness of TA support for wellbeing.

### ***2.9.6 Challenges of TA support for wellbeing literature***

The theme across the studies considered for review is that there appeared to be more advantages than disadvantages for the wellbeing of students linked to TA support. However, the common challenges identified by pupils in the literature are social stigma, exclusion, and peer separation which are now explained.

In terms of the challenges with social stigma, Broer et al. (2005) found that the nature of paraprofessional support delivery was socially stigmatising for some of the students in their study, opening the possibility of negative feelings around being different in the classroom, such as embarrassment, with one student commenting on how others would look at them because of the support and ask why they had to have support from someone twice as old as them. The authors identified a need for paraprofessional support to be deployed in a less stigmatising way. Webster and Blatchford (2017) also reported that for a number of participants, high levels of one-to-one TA support was noted to have a stigmatising effect on them. One student shared not wanting to be seen as different and did not like to ask for help in front of the class. Another student also spoke of how they did not like being in the bottom set and having a helper as they did

not like that everyone else thought they then needed help, and that this was embarrassing for them.

The issue of social stigma is a salient challenge with implications for the social inclusion of CYP, particularly with respect to their prospects for peer interaction and relationship building. Broer et al. (2005) showed that some students reported perceiving the assistance they received as a barrier to cultivating close friendships with peers, with one student lamenting the absence of intimate companionship during their high school years due to having such support, feeling like they were treated different by their peers in a negative way because of the support they received. Mortier et al. (2010) added that some participants felt the support assistants would cut into their conversations, suggesting a socially intrusive aspect of TA support which has also been highlighted previously.

Ward (2011) examined the social relationships and friendships of four secondary school students (aged 13-19-years-old) in New Zealand with severe physical disabilities. They note how reliance of the student on paraprofessional support can increase separation from classmates and friends. This can subsequently have negative impacts on their peer relations. They also noted that seating arrangements due to receiving assistance sometimes meant one pupil was isolated; one student noted how the assistant would sit next to him, and when he stopped receiving assistance, that no one else sat next to him as the students got used to where they were sitting. Overall, the researchers noted how evident it was that assistants physically hindered the opportunities of the pupils to

interact with peers, and subsequently, make social connections. In summary, the aforementioned studies appear to suggest that TA support can be linked to barriers with social interaction and increased social exclusion. A limitation of the study by Ward (2011) is that it was unclear how pupil views were synthesised with other data, including playground and classroom observations, and additional interviews with teachers, teacher assistants, parents, and some siblings and peers.

Tews & Lupart (2008) found that as the participants reported spending the majority of their school day with their support assistant instead of with other students in their class, that their socialisation and opportunity to network with peers may be compromised. However, interestingly, the pupil voice data indicated that students felt paraprofessional support increased social interaction. It is important to note that many of the pupils in this study spoke of feeling socially isolated. The researchers suggested that the paraprofessional may have filled a companion void in that they were a replacement friend in the absence of strong peer relationships. It could be that there was a companion void because of the social isolation that may occur when working with TAs. It may also be that social stigma negatively impacts how peers interact with the student supported by the TA. Therefore, it could be said that much is unknown about how TAs impact the social prospects of the students they work with. In summary, there are emerging findings that TA support may hinder peer interactions, but the mechanisms behind this are unknown, especially in KS4 pupils specifically. Research has evidenced how the social self-consciousness of CYP increases with age (Crick & Dodge, 1994; Brown, 1990), including an increased awareness of external opinions, and heightened



sensitivity to social cues and social context. There could be more significant social ramifications of TA support at the point of KS4 compared to earlier phases of education where CYP may present as less self-conscious due to general maturity and cognitive development.

## **2.10 TA support for wellbeing independence literature**

Independence in wellbeing is an individual's ability to take responsibility and ownership for their emotional and mental health without having to rely solely on external factors. This is also the ability to engage in self-care behaviours which promote positive outcomes for mental health by managing one's own emotions and reactions in response to stressors or challenges, for example, stress management, seeking appropriate external support when necessary, exercise, and healthy eating (Hyseni-Duraku et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2019). Kumar and Shalini (2019) emphasised the importance of promoting the independence of students in wellbeing through targeted interventions, and they found that when students are more independent with wellbeing, they have lower anxiety and stress levels, and higher life satisfaction.

In terms of the literature reviewed for the current study, there is no one study which focused on how students perceived the support they receive from TAs to build their independence in wellbeing, but there is some research containing samples around the KS4 age range with some crossover which are highlighted. This research is sparse, and it is not yet possible to identify a consensus in the research base around how KS4 students perceive TA support for wellbeing independence. However, studies with

relevant findings which were identified in the systematic search are presented below. It must be noted that some of the findings are not on pupil voice, but rather consist more of observational and analytical data. Such data has been included to illustrate some instances of how TA support may have supported or hindered the wellbeing independence of students, and to possibly provide an overview of the areas which may be highlighted in the current study's findings.

There is a link between autonomy and wellbeing as highlighted earlier in this Chapter. There may also be a link between autonomy and wellbeing independence. Research has shown that individuals who experience self-determination and autonomy tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction and happiness (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Environments which are supportive of autonomy, such as schools, through encouraging self-directed decision making, are associated with improved psychological outcomes, such as less psychological burnout and increased intrinsic motivation (Ng e al., 2012).

Linked to this, there is research highlighting some challenges with TA support for wellbeing independence from the student perspective which involved findings on the perceptions of support necessity and the desire for autonomy and independence of students. For the purposes of this study, autonomy is categorised under wellbeing independence due to the clear role of autonomy within the motivational framework highlighted in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and motivation is an emotional state which directs behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When individuals feel autonomous, they are likely more motivated to engage in an activity and may display more independence in doing so, so motivation could be considered an internal state

which can facilitate independence from the aspect of engagement. Niemiec et al. (2009) highlighted how when individuals pursue their intrinsic goals which align to their interests and values, they are more likely to experience better wellbeing and satisfaction in life. This links to the importance of implementing a person-centred approach in that, through supporting students to work towards goals which are meaningful for them, they may feel an increased sense of autonomy which could have an impact on their wellbeing and independence in this area.

Research by Tews and Lupart (2008) reported that the importance of autonomy and student self-determination cannot be understated, and in their findings, various subthemes reflected how paraprofessional supports impacted student autonomy. This may also be linked to wellbeing and independence in wellbeing. They found seven of their participants reported that having their support was essential, and this necessary support was mostly aimed at social skills and inclusion. The authors noted how the individual perception of necessity could decrease the self-determination of an individual, and increase the toleration of both necessary and unnecessary assistance. In the same study, the majority of the participants reported that the assistants were in close proximity to them a lot, and that half of the participants liked having them close by, which, according to the researchers, signified emotional dependence. This may highlight the link between autonomy and wellbeing independence relating to self-esteem, suggesting that TAs have an important role in promoting the autonomy and motivation of the student they support. The claim that half of the sample may have been dependent on the TA because they liked having them close by is questionable. Just

because an individual wants someone to be in close proximity does not mean they are dependent. The study arguably does not have the depth in findings to ascertain the reasons as to why they liked the proximity, nor data on whether the students could demonstrate independence in the absence of the TA or not. A strength is in the wide sample in terms of age range as this promotes an insight into the impact of TA support across different phases of education. However, due to this wide range, the richness of the data could be compromised due to low numbers of participants from each phase of education. Therefore, the current study aimed to recruit a higher number of participants ( $n=25$ ) and in a narrower age bracket (KS4). This was done with the aim of increasing the trustworthiness of the findings.

It is important for students to feel autonomous and an associated sense of freedom and control over their lives, especially relating to their education. In terms of a desire for autonomy and independence, and the importance of students having a sense of freedom, research by Whitburn (2013) highlighted a theme in their findings whereby each student expressed a desire for autonomy, and that they appreciated when the paraprofessionals supported other students as well as them. One participant elaborated on this, describing how he felt liberated when they went to assist other students, saying “It gives me more independence and . . . free will” (p. 154) which suggests an increased sense of freedom in the absence of their presence. Another finding, although relating to learning support, but is pertinent to the idea of freedom and autonomy in the student, was that participants felt paraprofessionals were intruding on their independence by attempting to control how they attended to their learning, with one participant having

reported constantly trying to regain control of his learning from the TAs. Therefore, this finding highlights how TA support may hinder wellbeing independence through providing support they felt to be intrusive, linking back to the importance of considering the views of students when developing and implementing TA support.

In terms of evidence for how TAs may support wellbeing independence, research by Goodwin et al., (2022) highlighted the importance of pupil voice in promoting independence. They explored the experiences of Canadian individuals who received TA support in physical education. They used interpretative phenomenological analysis and life story approaches to gather retrospective data from 5 participants who were aged 18-30-years-old at the time and received TA support back when they attended school. Of the participants, one had part-time support in middle school (ages 12-14-years-old), two had full-time, and one had part-time support when they were 15-years-old. All participants used wheelchairs. One participant shared the importance of expressing their views to negotiate support and maintain boundaries which promoted independence. They also noted that being open with the assistant can lead to great possibilities. A limitation of the study by Goodwin et al., (2022) is that they only explored the student views relating to support in physical education. Therefore, the current study aimed to overcome this limitation by exploring student views across learning and wellbeing broadly, which could arguably facilitate a more holistic collection of pupil voice. Nonetheless, this important finding links to the need for person-centred approaches in developing and delivering TA support to student, both for learning and wellbeing.

Peer interactions and relationships are conceptualised as a factor influencing wellbeing for this study as previously explained. In developing independence in interacting with peers, research by Ward et al. (2011) noted how in their study on support assistants working with students with physical disabilities, there was a role for them to facilitate peer interactions by fading their support and stepping back to support the student in interacting with peers and their independence with this. This notion links to the research around the importance of TA-to-student proximity in supporting learning independence and the findings from how over support can hamper independence, demonstrating links between independence in both learning and wellbeing. In summary, although some findings are available on how pupils perceive TA support for wellbeing independence, this area of research is understudied, and there is no known research focusing specifically on this area alone. It is clear that having independence in managing wellbeing is important, and the current study aimed to provide findings which may develop an understanding of how TAs could do this and prevent dependency. This is important to the educational psychology profession as by providing such data, which was the aim of the study, educational psychologists may then be able to transfer their findings onto the school settings they work in, supporting them to improve the effectiveness of TA support.

## **2.11 Professional context and the role of educational psychologists**

The role of educational psychologists is broad and there is much variation in how the role is defined in literature. More generally, the role of the educational psychologist has been broadly defined as involving the following five types of work: consultation; assessment; intervention; research; and training. These modes can operate at the individual, group, and systemic level. Educational psychologists can also work across educational, care, and community settings to improve outcomes for CYP with SEND (Fallon et al., 2010). There is a need for educational psychologists to work collaboratively with CYP, parents, and education professionals to devise and agree interventions that are evidence-based and person-centred, as outlined in the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015). Educational psychologists have a function to their role in contributing professional advice as part of the Education, Health, and Care Needs Assessment which can then become an Education, Health, and Care Plan if agreed by a local authority. The Education, Health, and Care Plan is a legal document specifying the following:

- The views, interests, and aspirations of the individual and their parents/carers
- The individual's strengths and SEND
- The individual's health and social care needs
- The outcomes sought for the individual
- The special educational provision required to meet the individual's SEND

In terms of the relevance of the TA role to educational psychologists, the two roles cross-over in several ways. For example, educational psychologists can work with TAs and schools through the five aforementioned types of work, highlighting their opportunity

in supporting school professionals to refine their practice to improve outcomes for CYP. Therefore, this highlights the importance of the current study for the educational psychology profession, as the findings from the study may be used by educational psychologists to support them in working with schools to deploy TA support in a more effective way, if needed, that is focused on the views of the pupil, thus possibly promoting person-centred practice.

## **2.12 Evaluation of literature field**

The main approach to study in this area is qualitative, which is arguably appropriate due to the opportunity that qualitative methods are considered to afford in being inductive when compared to quantitative methods (Creswell, 2013; Thomas, 2006), and this is particularly important in fields of research that have been understudied, such as the field of current study for this thesis. In addition, there are particularly strong examples of studies with robust methodologies in this area involving interviews with multiple stakeholders which also implement mixed methodologies including case studies and observations (Blatchford et al., 2019; Hemmingson et al., 2003; Webster & Blatchford, 2017), and such studies provided opportunities to cross-reference and triangulate data in an endeavour to ensure and improve validity and data veracity.



## 2.13 Summary

After reviewing the relevant literature in the field, it is clear as to why pupil views should be collected and considered when making decisions about them. There is a wealth of benefits to this which are well embedded in the pre-existing literature and outlined in this Chapter and Chapter 1. One of the intended implications for the current study is to help inform schools and the educational psychology profession on how to deploy TAs in a way that is centred on pupil voice. In terms of a summary of the research reviewed for the study, there is a gap in the literature regarding the views of KS4 pupils with SEND in mainstream secondary schools in England around the one-to-one TA support they receive for both wellbeing and learning, and independence in those areas. Although there is not yet a sufficient amount of literature to come to a consensus around the strengths and challenges of TA support in these areas from the perspectives of pupils, there are some emerging themes in the research that have been highlighted so far. Broadly, the literature seems to indicate that TA support is linked to more strengths and benefits than challenges for the learning of pupils. However, TA support appears to be linked with more challenges for learning independence for pupils than strengths. In terms of evidence for how TA support impacts wellbeing, so far, the data indicates more advantages than challenges. There is a significant paucity in research exploring how TA support is perceived by students in terms of wellbeing independence. However, the importance of student autonomy and sense of freedom may be important in building wellbeing independence.

In terms of the TA role, much is unknown about how KS4 students perceive TA support. There is no one study focusing specifically on KS4 students. It is not yet known if TA proximity impacts student learning and wellbeing or if they facilitate peer support systems around the student. It is also largely unknown if TAs may impact the relationships of the students they support with their peers and if and how the TA to student relationship has a perceived impact on learning and wellbeing. Other areas of the perceived experience of the TA support are understudied. For example, how TA support may be linked to attention, learning independence, and confidence. Additionally, little is currently known about the pupils' perceived experience of TA support relating to their confidence levels and also if and how sharing feelings with the TA may be linked to wellbeing. In summary, perceived experience of TA support by KS4 students and how this may be linked to learning and wellbeing and independence in these areas is largely understudied. Therefore, the current study aimed to explore the perspectives of KS4 students on understudied and unresearched areas of TA support with the view to ascertain information on what is working well and the areas for development of such support. After reviewing the literature for the thesis, there is a gap in studies which collect data on how the pupils themselves think TA support should be improved which the current study also aimed to address.

## 2.14 Research questions

To address the gaps in the literature, the aim of the current study is to answer the following questions:

- What do KS4 pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for their wellbeing?
- What do KS4 pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for building independence in wellbeing?
- What do KS4 pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for their learning?
- What do KS4 pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for building independence in learning?

## Chapter 3 – Methodology

### 3.1 Participants

#### *3.1.1 Sample and participant recruitment*

For schools to participate, they had to be mainstream secondary schools located in England. Schools in England only were chosen due to other countries in the UK having differing policies and practices for CYP with SEND, so the exclusion is justified as doing so is possibly more likely to provide a more cohesive understanding of SEND support in the context of England and its SEND policies. If all UK countries were included, variations in SEND policies between countries in the UK may mean there are differences in TA support practice, potentially leading to differing experiences of TA support country-to-country. although this could generate important comparisons between countries, this was deemed too much of an undertaking for the current project. Mainstream schools were chosen instead of special schools due to challenges that may come with facilitating inclusive education for pupils with SEND in mainstream settings. It could be said that inclusive education is easier to facilitate in special schools due to the experience and training of school staff, inclusive school ethos, all the cohort having identified SEND, and more access to specialist resources than in a mainstream setting. There are likely to be different challenges and experiences of students receiving TA support in mainstream compared to special schools; collecting data from both settings would be better suited to a separate research study allowing for comparison in

perspectives across the two settings; This comparison was too large for the current study.

To be included, participants had to be of KS4 age (14-16 years old) and have identified needs in cognition and learning and social, emotional, and mental health. They also had to be receiving one-to-one, in-class TA support for both areas of need. The support for learning and wellbeing also had to be delivered with the view to build independence in these areas, and this had to be reflected in the student support plans. The participants did not have to have Education, Health, and Care Plans. Secondary students were chosen due to the abundance of studies in this field of literature collecting perspectives on TA support in primary school aged pupils, but less so for secondary age children, particularly KS4 students.

As the current study is exploring wellbeing support from TAs, it was important to consider the inclusion of TAs who are qualified ELSAs as well. It was felt that recruiting students who were supported by TAs trained as ELSAs for learning and wellbeing outside of the ELSA intervention could narrow the sample. Additionally, the aim of the current study was to not evaluate this distinct intervention delivered outside of the classroom, and doing so was beyond the scope of the study. Therefore, focus was placed on exploring student experiences of TA support for learning and wellbeing in combination, which is incompatible with the ELSA intervention as their aim is to focus on wellbeing in isolation.

Participants with and without Education, Health, and Care Plans could participate because students do not need to have an Education, Health, and Care Plan to receive TA support. Students had to be in receipt of one-to-one TA support. One-to-one support was chosen because of the research indicating that the one-to-one support system where the TA is closely attached to the pupil, referred to as the Velcro model, may lead to poorer student outcomes, especially dependence on TA support (Vivash & Morgan, 2019), and it is pertinent to the aim of the study in exploring how TAs support independence. The intended sample size was 20 participants as literature has suggested that for studies using semi-structured/in-depth interviews, there is a requirement for a minimum sample size between 5 and 25 (Cresswell, 2007; Saunders, 2012). Based on time restrictions and resources available, the researcher deemed twenty interviews to be appropriate and achievable. Despite a thorough, two-waved approach to recruitment, 12 participants were recruited overall due to time pressures and difficulties engaging schools during busy periods. Additionally, the narrow selection criteria for participants led to challenges identifying eligible participants.

Participants were recruited from 5 mainstream secondary schools within a local authority in the South East of England where the researcher was on placement as a trainee educational psychologist. The study used convenience sampling in two waves. Wave one consisted of an email being sent to the whole educational psychology team; this informed the educational psychologists of the study details and asked them to send the information to the schools they work with to gauge interest. Wave two consisted of the researcher approaching schools they had previously worked with as a trainee

educational psychologist and also schools they were working with at the time of the research (both in the same local authority) to gauge their interest. Convenience sampling was used due to the flexibility it allows in approaching recruitment. This was deemed necessary for the project due to the context of pressured school environments and an anticipated reluctance for schools to engage due to other activities being prioritised. Therefore, the researcher was able to adapt the approach ad-hoc and add additional waves of sampling that may not have been possible through other, more structured sampling methods, such as stratified and systematic sampling. Table 1 shows the demographics of the sample.

**Table 1***Demographics for Participants*

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Age	School Year
Christopher	He/Him	15	11
Francis	He/Him	15	11
June	They/Them	14	10
Michelle	She/Her	14	10
Liam	He/Him	14	10
Alex	He/Him	14	10
Sol	He/Him	15	10
Richard	He/Him	14	10
Jonas	He/Him	14	10
Luna	She/Her	14	10
Imran	He/Him	14	10
George	He/Him	14	10

**3.2 Design**

The study used a qualitative design through semi-structured interviews. The rationale for a qualitative design comes from the limited research exploring pupil perspectives around TA support at the secondary school level. A qualitative study allowed for an



inductive approach which was appropriate due to the lack of pre-existing theory and research in the area which prevented the researcher from deducing hypotheses. Individual, semi-structured interviews were chosen to gather qualitative information because they can provide rich data (Hamilton, 2013), whereas with quantitative methods, such as surveys, the data could be limited due to less or no opportunities for further, ad-hoc exploration. Semi-structured interviews provide opportunity for extended probing and spontaneous questioning to collect rich data and ensure full answers to open-ended questions, opportunities for which can be limited with survey designs (Hamilton, 2013; Newcomer et al., 2015) and fully structured interviews which do not allow for ad hoc adaptations. This method was further justified due to the gap in this area of literature, meaning that deductive approaches to data collection and analysis would have been challenging, so it was important to have flexibility in the approach. If the interviews were fully structured, this could have limited findings and prevented further exploration of views through spontaneous questioning.

The possibility of focus groups was discussed. However, it was decided that sharing in a group setting may lead to some participants feeling they could not be as open compared to a one-to-one setting, so individual interviews were used as they provide a sense of confidentiality which may allow participants to speak more freely than they would in a focus group (Morse et al., 2002). The difficulties with individual, semi-structured interviews can include social desirability in responses and challenges in eliciting and managing discussion around sensitive topics (Guest et al., 2021; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Steps taken to mitigate these risks are explained ahead.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher who then transcribed them for analysis. The researcher was not known to the pupils prior to the study and was classed as an external interviewer, referring to an individual who is separate from the context in which they conduct their interviews. An external interviewer was chosen as literature suggests that doing so can increase the likelihood of pupils being open and honest, and thus providing arguably more accurate data (Altrichter & Gstettner, 1993). However, this could also be a disadvantage as the interviewer was an unfamiliar adult, and individuals may feel uncomfortable due to not having an established relationship with them. This could potentially lead to less rich answers. To mitigate this, the researcher spent 5-10 minutes at the start of each interview building rapport with the participant to help them feel more comfortable. This was also done with the view to support participants in feeling more able to discuss potentially sensitive topics if needed, particularly around wellbeing.

### **3.3 Ontological and epistemological considerations**

The current study took a social constructionist approach which assumes that meanings are frameworks constructed through interactions. Individuals interpret their own experiences and interactions with the world to form their own realities. It is essential to explore the different perspectives of TA support and to recognise the complex, multi-faceted individuality in the experiences of students, rather than attempting to take an objectivist, realist perspective to form an overarching understanding of a shared reality

across a varied group of individuals. Individuals exist in unique contexts and an attempt to report a consensus for the study population arguably neglects the individuality of their environments. It would be difficult to form generalisations from such findings as there are likely several factors which impact how a student perceives and experiences TA support. The social constructionist approach also acknowledges the influence of the systems around an individual and how they influence individual experience and the perspectives of said experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

The social constructionist approach was also chosen due to the exploratory design of the current study, where the aim was not to generalise the findings to a wider population, but rather, to explore the perspectives of the participants, with a focus on the transferability of findings rather than generalisability. Therefore, the study was a process of highlighting the different perspectives that occur rather than providing evidence of an objective reality, which complements the definition of social constructionism by Burden (2008).

### **3.4 Reflexivity**

It is important for the researcher to be aware of their positionality when conducting research. Positionality refers to the experiences and beliefs of the individual regarding a certain area. It has been suggested that a researcher who positions themselves as objective in qualitative studies is ineffective (Yardley, 2000). It is important to recognise the social constructionist perspective of the study, in particular, how meanings are

constructed between the participants and researcher through discourse. In terms of the researcher's positionality, they worked as a TA in a mainstream secondary school. In this role, the researcher experienced resistance from the pupil they were assigned to support, leading to such beliefs that TA support is perceived largely negatively by pupils, especially older students, which may be for a myriad of reasons, including social stigma and desire for autonomy. Therefore, the researcher engaged in reflection around their beliefs in supervision to ensure that they were managing and utilising their positionality to maintain the validity and reliability of the research. This consisted of withholding sharing personal experiences of being a TA in interviews and refraining from asking leading questions.

### **3.5 Materials**

#### ***3.5.1 Interview schedule development and pilot study***

The interview schedule (Appendix B) was developed by the main researcher and then adapted based on feedback from the two research supervisors and a pilot study. The interview was split into four sections of questioning: learning, learning independence, wellbeing, and wellbeing independence. There was also a general section containing questions to ascertain how much time the participant spent with a TA and to explore what kind of support they received and when. This section came first to help settle the interviewee before asking them to reflect on their experiences of TA support.

Each of the following four areas contained questions providing opportunity for the participant to share what they felt was working well and what changes could be made. The schedule contained a variety of open and closed questions and scaling items. Closed questions were included for simple questions that required a yes or no response. Open questions were used to encourage reflection on the question area and provide opportunity for exploration to support the inductive research process. Additionally, scaling items were included to provide concrete references for arguably abstract concepts in an effort to support understanding of the question and the ability to provide a rich answer.

For both the learning and wellbeing sections, questions were included to check the participant's understanding of the concepts. The questions created to address the four research questions were kept general to ensure an inductive exploration. However, based on the literature review for the thesis, prompts for areas of questioning were devised. The prompt areas reflected findings from the literature review. Some prompts are as follows: social stigma, social inclusion, confidence, engagement, attention, understanding of learning, proximity, and over support. Questions for the prompts were not created, but rather, they were raised ad-hoc during interviews where appropriate. Additionally, some questions were adapted from previously used interview schedules from peer-reviewed studies (Pinkard, 2021; Webster & Blatchford, 2017).

Once the interview schedule was finalised, a pilot study was conducted with ( $n=2$ ) participants. Their data was included in the final analysis. The participants for the pilot

met all criteria for inclusion in the study, and including their data was justified due to minimal changes to the schedule following the pilot interviews and supervisor feedback, meaning that if the same participants were interviewed with the post-pilot schedule, it is likely that the data would be similar. Following the pilot, some questions were reordered to facilitate a logical flow, and some removed due to irrelevance.

To maintain veracity, when the participant communicated a grievance about the TA support, the researcher supported the participant to express their feelings around the situation, but also endeavoured to ascertain the facts of the situation. This was done by asking the student to explain what happened sequentially and asking them how someone else, an objective individual, would describe what happened. The researcher was aware of the power dynamic when interviewing participants which was likely unbalanced, and it could have been that participants may have felt the need to report only positive perspectives of school staff to the researcher due to fear around the repercussions of disclosing the challenges in case they were shared with the school. Therefore, at the beginning of each interview, the researcher took time to reassure confidentiality and anonymity. If the participant appeared reluctant to share more information, this was verbalised and reflected back to the participant, at which point confidentiality and anonymity were reiterated. The participant was also then reassured that they only had to share information they wanted to and that there was no pressure to answer any of the questions. To support accessibility, the researcher created simplified versions of the questions with simple language and visuals to support understanding. Participants were offered printed questions to support those who may require visual

supports in learning which can support a range of needs including information processing and understanding. The interviewer made ad-hoc adaptations to meet the needs and interests of the participants to facilitate engagement, for example, re-explaining questions using alternative vocabulary.

## **3.6 Procedure**

### **3.6.1 Ethics**

The research received approval from the Psychology and Human Development Department Ethics Committee at the Institute of Education in May 2022 (Appendix C). In accordance with ethical guidelines, the consent of parents and carers was obtained before participants were approached and asked to take part. Through the consent forms, participants and parents/carers were informed that participation was voluntary, and that data would be anonymised; they were also made aware of their right to withdraw and that this could be requested and granted at any point.

### **3.6.2 School procedure**

When schools were approached to take part in the study, a conversation took place with each special educational needs coordinator, informing them of the research aims, scope, methodologies, and requirements from the school. The schools were then asked to approach parents/carers to gain consent for their children through an online consent

form. Once obtained, the school were then instructed to approach potential participants to inform them of the research and seek verbal consent prior to my interview. In terms of consent, one member senior staff from each school signed the online consent form which consisted of headteachers and special educational needs coordinators who received permission from the headteacher.

### ***3.6.3 Interview procedure***

The interviews took place between September 2022-February 2023. The participants were told in advance that they could have another individual (support staff or friend, for example) supporting them if they wished. One interview took place with the student's TA present as per their request, and another in the company of their close friend. At the beginning of the interviews, the participants were welcomed, then the interviewer introduced themselves and engaged in rapport building for 5-10 minutes. The purpose of the study was explained, and the interviewer checked the participant was willing to proceed. They were then asked to complete the online consent form and were assured confidentiality and anonymity except for safeguarding issues. Their right to withdraw was also explained. Participants were informed that they could pause or stop the interview at any point and that audio recordings would be deleted once transcription had finished. Following this, interviewer asked the participant to inform them should they not want to answer any questions and then proceeded to conduct the interview.



### **3.7 Data analysis**

The project used the inductive thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) which considers how meaning is created by both the researcher and participants before, during, and after the process of exploring the research topic and conducting the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Inductive thematic analysis was selected as it is compatible with the social constructionist perspective due to its theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006); the inductive process allows codes to be generated which are not shaped by existing theory and evidence, therefore placing importance on the realities of the participants and their narratives, thus acknowledging the nature of the social constructionist perspective. Inductive thematic analysis is further justified as it is particularly important in an understudied area of research where the lack of evidence and theory arguably make it difficult to hypothesise and collect and analyse data deductively. The five steps of data analysis the researcher undertook are explained below and were cyclical, with steps 2-5 being revisited several times.

#### Phase 1: Data familiarisation

The data were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and uploaded to the data analysis software NVivo 20. The software was chosen for ease of storage and organisation. The researcher transcribed the interviews themselves, allowing them to familiarise themselves with the data before the formal thematic analysis process started. Each transcript was then read while the interview audio recording was playing

simultaneously to ensure accuracy; this also allowed for tone and attitude to be noted at key points of the interview to support interpretation.

## Phase 2: Coding

Initial codes were generated by the researcher upon the subsequent reading of transcripts and the codes were collated into NVivo 20. The researcher used mostly semantic codes to include as much of the participants' language as possible. The semantic coding process is information-centric and promotes a close relationship between the textual expressions and codes. Semantic coding identifies the surface and explicit meaning of the data they represent. The researcher does not infer their own meaning. This method was implemented to facilitate integrity in the representation of the participants' views and is important to reduce the level of interpretation by the researcher during this early stage of analysis. However, this process was not always possible due to some data being vague and relating to earlier lines of discussion in the interview, so latent coding was also used as a minority approach. Latent coding is researcher centric as it describes the meaning of the coding unit by developing a concise code that represented what the researcher thought the coding reflected. This was important to utilise vague data which may have otherwise been omitted from analysis (Saldaña, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1998)

### Phase 3: Searching for themes

Once all data were coded, the code relationships were analysed to generate the main themes. Once the themes were identified, the codes were sorted into sub-themes which encapsulated the overall theme in finer detail to reflect the multi-faceted nature of the concepts they represented. When all themes were identified, outliers were grouped as miscellaneous and then reviewed to ensure they were included where possible. Themes were developed through a meaning-based pattern approach instead of a domain summary conceptualisation. This was because the themes captured implicit ideas beyond the surface meaning of the data, thus providing a more detailed analysis of the data than a domain summary approach which captures a more semantic or surface level of meaning, which have been described as underdeveloped (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The importance of themes was deemed in terms of relevance to the research aims rather than their quantitative prevalence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, the number of codes in each theme and sub-theme were recorded to strengthen external validity and demonstrate their significance in the data set, as well as how many participants shared data relating to the themes and subthemes.

### Phase 4: Reviewing themes

This involved checking whether the themes made sense in relation to the coded data and if they translated successfully when compared to the original interview data.

Reviewing themes is important for the trustworthiness of the research (Clarke & Braun,

2013). Identifying theme significance relied heavily on frequency. However, themes and sub-themes with much less frequency are emphasised in the findings and discussion as this is in keeping with the social constructionist stance of the project, thus placing value on individual experience and realities, rather than focusing solely on the most prominent themes.

#### Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

An analysis for each theme was written up which included definitions of each theme, highlighting their boundaries and contributions to the analysis. This also included definitions of sub-themes and extracts to demonstrate the codes (please see Appendix D).

## Chapter 4 – Findings

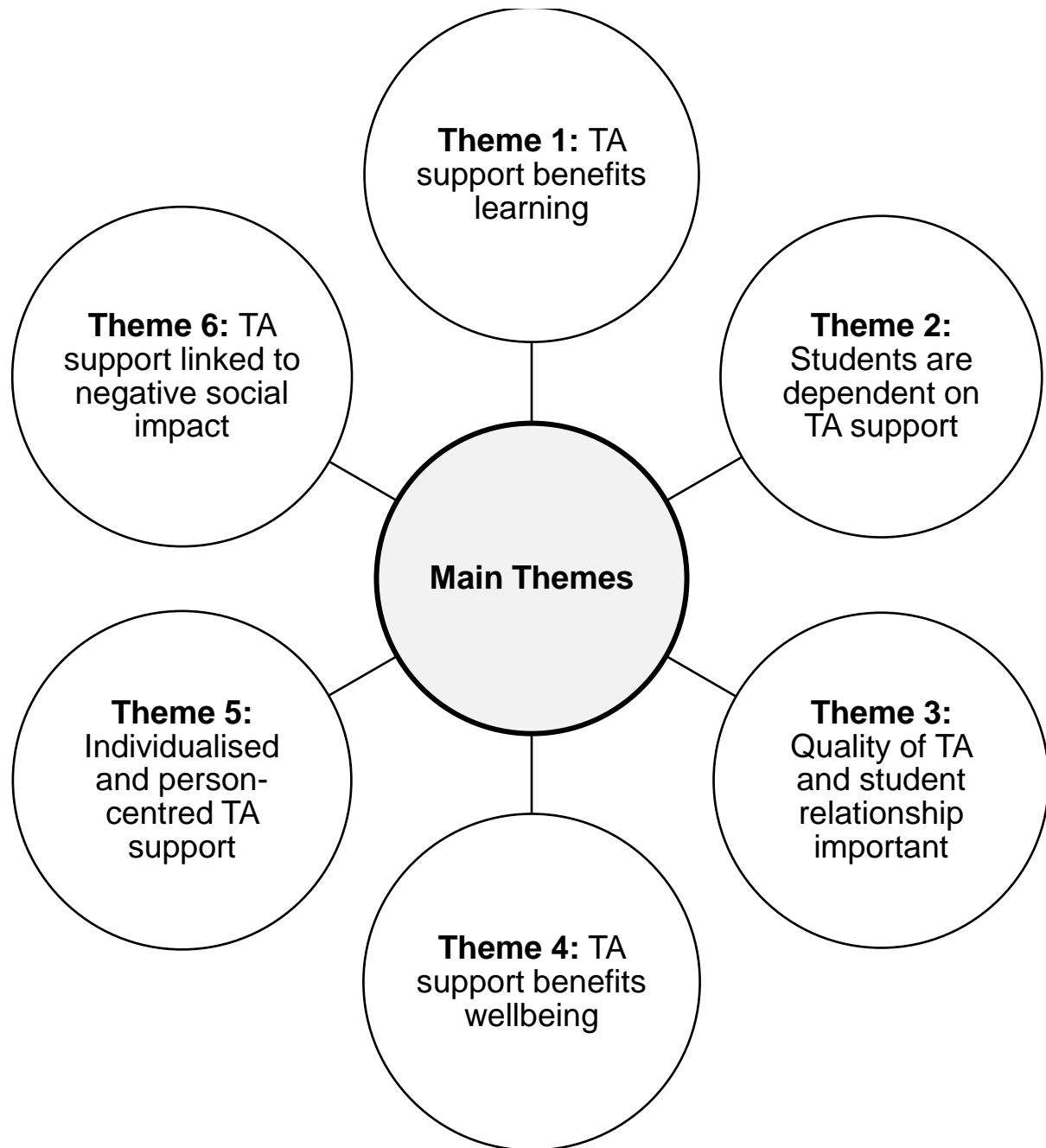
Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. There were six main thematic areas and Figure 2 shows an overview of the main themes from the data.

The research questions are as follows:

- What do KS4 pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for their wellbeing?
- What do KS4 pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for building independence in wellbeing?
- What do KS4 pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for their learning?
- What do KS4 pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for building independence in learning?

**Figure 2**

*Main Theme Map*



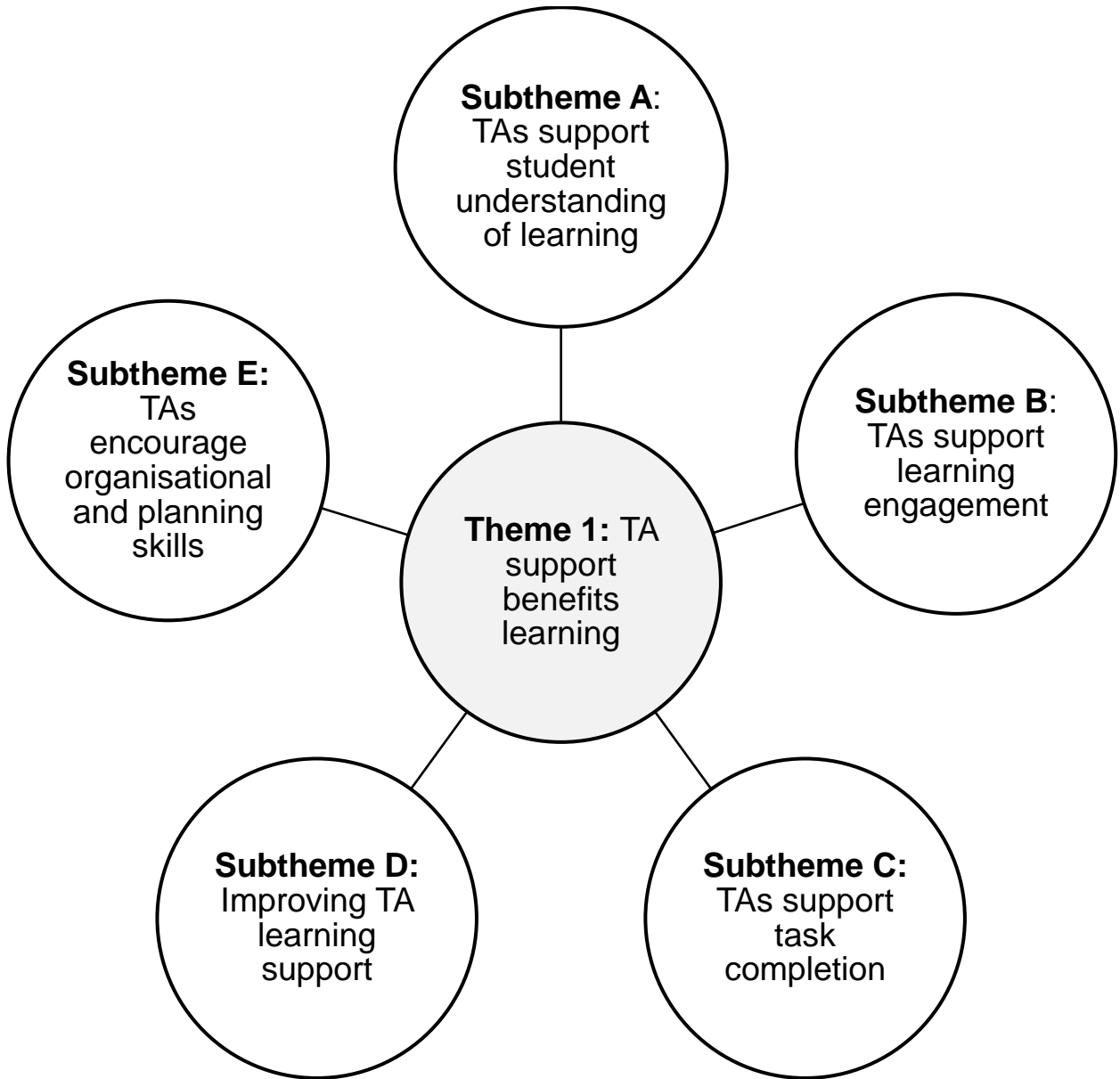
#### **4.1 Theme 1: TA support benefits learning**

This theme details the view that TA support appears to help students with their learning.

The theme contains ( $n=73$ ) codes from ( $n=9$ ) participants. There are five sub-themes representing the range of benefits on learning. Figure 3 shows the thematic map for Theme 1.

**Figure 3**

*Thematic Map of Theme 1*





#### **4.1.1 Subtheme A: TAs support student understanding of learning**

This sub-theme, the most prominent within the learning benefits overarching theme, details how ( $n=9$ ) participants of ( $n=12$ ) participants in the whole sample shared that their TA support helps them to understand the work they do in a variety of ways. There are ( $n=30$ ) codes in this subtheme. One participant shared that the TA did this through rewording which was helpful for them: “Uh, for example, some of the questions are worded kind of weirdly, so [TA] helps to reword it into a way that makes sense” (Alex, Year 10). This shows that TAs can help students to understand language.

In addition to rewording, it is clear from the data that TAs support student understanding through second explanations and breaking down activities. Below are several statements from the participants explaining how TA support facilitates their comprehension of learning:

“... if something's not understood by a teacher or if they may, if they've like not explained it in enough detail for, for one, someone to learn it, then the teaching assistant is there to fully explain how to actually do it” (Sol, Year 10)

“Second explanations always are necessary, uh, can be necessary as well. Even if you are, even if it's subject that someone that someone knows how to do it off by heart, a second explanation [from TA] always helps. Cause there's always that chance of making mistakes...” (Sol, Year 10)

“So I have my teacher assistants in most of my classes to like help if I don't understand stuff they can come and sit next to me and explain it to me and that”  
(Luna, Year 10)

“...Like they [TAs] kind of guide you through it. They don't like, like tell you what it is they like make you figure out like give like little bit of nudge to like get you started off like and how just like to more accurately display your ideas” (Imran, Year 10)

#### ***4.1.2 Subtheme B: TAs support learning engagement***

This subtheme contains ( $n=21$ ) codes from ( $n=9$ ) participants. The data highlighted that TA support appears to facilitate the engagement of students in learning meaning that they can help the pupils to concentrate, focus, and participate in the learning presented to them. From the data, engagement included encouragement from the TA. For example, one participant spoke of how since having TA support, they have now paid more attention:

“I have paid more attention in my English lessons [since having TA support]. So for example, in one lesson, we were we were doing some stuff on the way Shakespeare writes his plays? I think without them [TAs], I probably would have

paid no attention.” (Alex, Year 10). They also said that without the TA, that they “Probably wouldn't be as focused as I am” (Alex, Year 10)

Additionally, one participant shared how a previous TA rushed them through activities which was unhelpful for them, leading to feelings of panic. This has implications for TA support. There is arguably value in terms of supporting students in individualised ways, supporting the process of learning, and helping the student go at their own pace. Doing so may lead to the student feeling calmer which could have implications for wellbeing:

“Um, well like when I used to have this old teaching assistant, she used to rush me a lot. And I, I don't do very good when I'm under pressure and I panic. Um, because I have like, I write really slow. That's why sometimes they write for me, but when you have someone [TA] over your shoulder going like hurry up and all that, you're like, you panic even more and then sometimes you can't read your writing. And so it's not very nice” (Luna, Year 10)

#### ***4.1.3 Subtheme C: TAs support task completion***

In this sub-theme, ( $n=8$ ) participants spoke of how having TA support helps them to complete their work. This subtheme contains ( $n=10$ ) codes. One participant shared how although they only occasionally worked with TAs, when TAs are present in lessons, they helped them to complete learning “Uh, sometimes. I mean they [TAs] don't really come into my lessons cause I don't really need that. But what there's my TA just keeps me on

top of work and everything” (George, Year 10) and “Definitely, definitely my English book. The amount of work in it is definitely increased with one [a TA]” (Alex, Year 10)

In addition to task completion, there is also a dimension to this aspect of TA support where they supported the students to catch up when they have missed work and stay on top of general learning demands where it was hard for the student to manage due to their SEND:

“It would be difficult to catch up because sometimes a question might be asked and you weren’t in the lesson and the TA has taken notes and that’s really helpful” (Christopher, Year 11)

With the second quote from this student, it is clear that having consistent time in their timetable for support from TAs to help catch up on work supports them to complete it, and reducing the curriculum demands more generally was helpful for this student as they were able to drop a subject from their timetable to make room for such time with TAs:

“Being able to take time and having time in here every week student learning provision [where students go to get out-of-class TA support] to sort out work. I’m just constantly procrastinating at home, and I can take time to do that work in school which is really helpful, so definitely the time. I just think I would struggle academically without the extra time. To do ten subjects would be really difficult.

So that's just a constant on the timetable so I get an hour there instead and sorts thing out for the day" (Christopher, Year 11)

#### **4.1.4 Subtheme D: Improving TA learning support**

This subtheme captures the views of ( $n=4$ ) participants who were able to explicitly identify ways to improve TA support for learning. The subtheme itself contains ( $n=8$ ) codes. This is separate to how TAs can support students to be more independent in their learning. One participant spoke of how it would be helpful for the TA to have learnt about the lesson topic prior to avoid confusion and further support the student's learning: "...it's kind of confusing to the student because, uh, they dunno if you, you can ask the TA the question or not because they might not like understand it..." (Jonas, Year 10). The same participant was asked how TA learning support could be improved and said the following:

"... to have the teacher assistants, um, knowing what the lessons can be about before, um, it actually starts ah, um, instead of them, um, like learning with you, they, they can already, um, pretty much like remember from uh, when they're in school and all that. Um, so then they can help you based off of um, just in like general knowledge and um, like how they remember it." (Jonas, Year 10)

Two participants shared how the availability and access to TA in-class support was a challenge, and when asked how TA support could be improved, they spoke of how it

would be helpful for the school to have more TAs: "...it always looks like they're [TAs] struggling keeping up with all the students... so it would definitely be having two teacher assistants instead of one" (Jonas, Year 10). The other participant shared:

"Uh, well we only have like two [TAs] per year so there's only one of us. So she [TA] can't really get around all of the students that need help cause there's quite a lot of us" (Luna, Year 10)

#### ***4.1.5 Subtheme E: TAs encourage the development of organisational and planning skills***

In this subtheme, ( $n=3$ ) participants shared that TA support helped them be more organised with managing the demands of schooling and being proactive with preparing for examinations. The subtheme contained ( $n=4$ ) codes. The following student spoke of how they would be forgetful with homework, but that TA support helped them with planning and organisation around this:

"It's definitely been a help. Like now I don't have to get like, oh I haven't done my homework. Mainly, but I just do it in class. But it like, if there's anything that I haven't quite often it's reminded me [the TA reminds him] like, oh yeah, I need to do that" (Imran, Year 10)

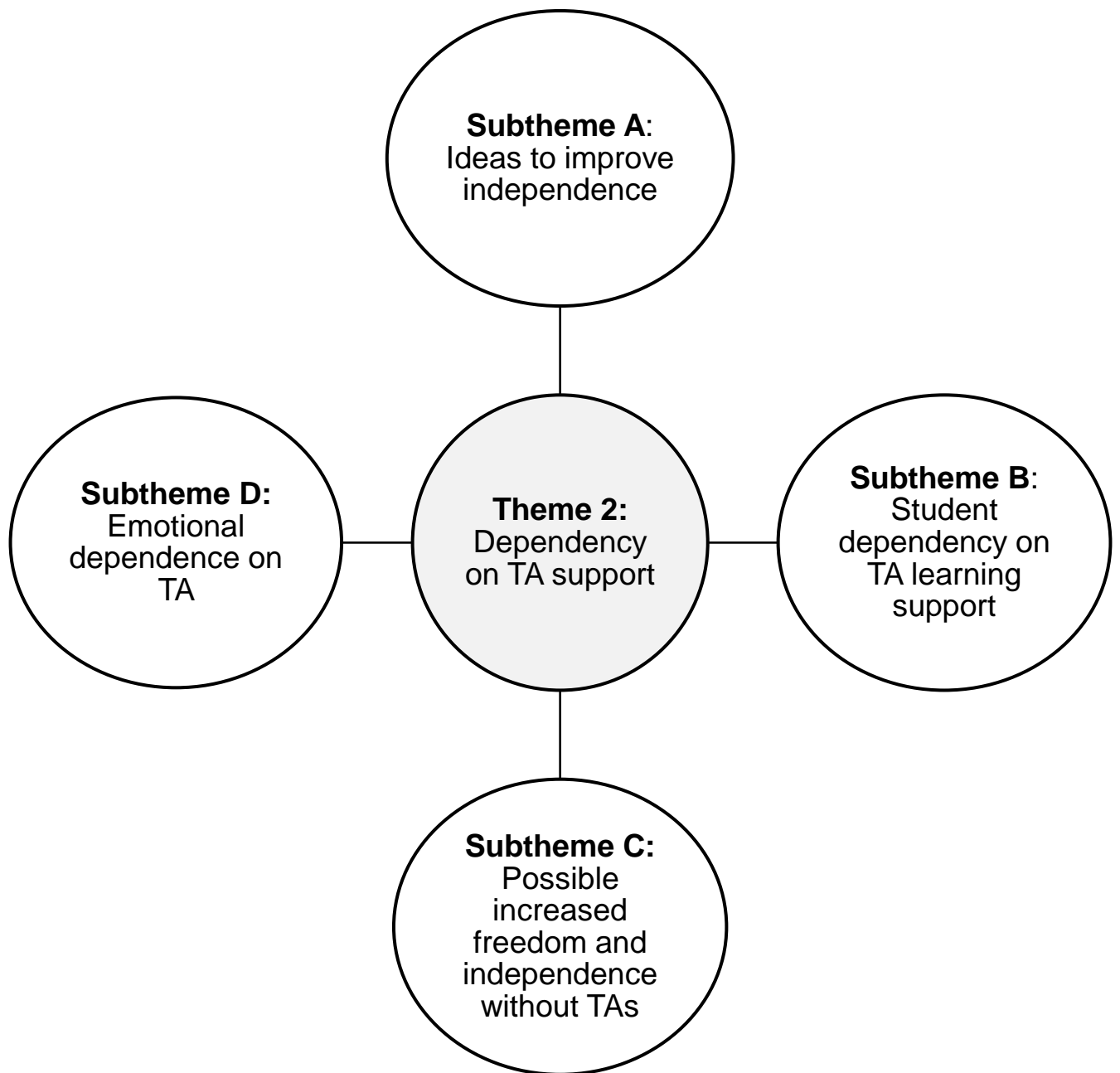
Two participants shared how TA support helped them prepare for tests and examinations. The following participant said that in addition to the TA giving reminders to do work, they also encouraged them to revise for a test: “Yes. And if like you've got a test coming up like this period [they will say] so do you wanna sit down and revise during lunch or something?” (Imran, Year 10).

#### **4.2 Theme 2: Dependency on TA support**

This theme encapsulates the finding that the majority of the participants ( $n=8$ ) in the study appear to be experiencing a dependency on TA support. This dependency appeared to be more focused on learning, but there was a smaller subtheme highlighting an emotional dependency on the TA. The theme contains ( $n=72$ ) codes. Figure 4 shows the thematic map.

**Figure 4**

*Thematic Map of Theme 2*





#### **4.2.1 Subtheme A: Ideas to improve independence**

This sub-theme has ( $n=26$ ) codes from ( $n=6$ ) participants and details the opportunities for the TA to support students in a way that builds the independence of the students they work with. There is a prominent idea in this sub-theme around how the TAs should give the student opportunities to work through the task independently, suggesting that they should only become involved when necessary which links to the individualised support theme. Five participants commented on this idea:

“So if, but they do give you the times where they let you, where they have you figure out, figure out what to be, what to be, what to do, um, on your own. So there are those times where, um, you figure out what to do by yourself which actually is just you learning and not having someone who knows what to do do it for you” (Jonas, Year 10)

“...if someone's there just saying what needs to be done all the time, then that's not actually you learning. It's just basically just like, just writing down what someone else says” (Sol, Year 10)

“It's possibly easier [for the TAs] to sit back and watch and give the old reminder to put your [the student] hand up, or speak in turn, or wait a while, or write down your workings, erm, and eventually, those become habits, and which point you're no longer needed [the TA]” (Francis, Year 11)

The following participant was also able to explain that when the TA gave him the answer to the work, it made him feel less independent and impacted how good he felt at the subject, possibly highlighting an impact on confidence:

“Um, it kind of makes me feel, um, like I'm not that independent, um, and it makes me feel like, um, I'm not that great at that subject. Because it's gotten to a point where they're just giving me the answers, um, like straight up, um, without me trying to solve it. Um, but I know that's not the case most of the time. Um Okay. It's just, yeah, sometimes that's how I feel and um, that does affect sometimes with my learning” (Jonas, Year 10)

Additionally, another participant spoke of how they did not want to be given the answer, but rather, work it out for themselves:

“...you don't wanna be just given the answer, you wanna, cause even people with TAs also say they want to figure out what it, what the answer is for just themselves as well. And not just be throughout told the, what the answer is without having time to figure out what it is” (Sol, Year 10)

It appears that there is an importance for the responsibility for learning success being placed on the student and instilling that perception in order to work successfully with a

TA and build independence. When asked if TA support helped him to be more independent, the participant said:

“Yeah, I think it kind of reminds me that it's up to me to do things. Like not everyone is gonna keep telling me to do stuff. Kind of just like reminds me that I'm in control of what I do” (George, Year 10)

One participant spoke of how he had TA support in just one lesson a day, and that if he had more, he probably would have gotten used to it. Due to this, he was able to learn to cope on his own:

“I think it's because it was only once a day maybe, so I didn't have it the whole time cause then I wouldn't be able to cope cause I'd get used to it. So I had some lessons to learn to cope on my own and other lessons that I had support”  
(Richard, Year 10)

In terms of other ways to build independence with learning, when asked how they could be more independent in his learning, one participant spoke of their difficulty in starting some sentences, so supporting students to get started with their work at the output stage could build their learning independence:

“For example, sort of them [TAs] work like, starting some of the sentences, I kind of can't think of something, so get them to help. Yeah. So I can be forced to rely on myself in that way” (Alex, Year 10)

#### ***4.2.2 Subtheme B: Students dependency on TA learning support***

This sub-theme details the feeling that participants reported which allude to not being able to manage learning in the absence of TA support and reflects the idea that some participants feel less able to cope with learning in the absence of TA support. The subtheme contains data from ( $n=7$ ) of the ( $n=12$ ) participants, consisting of ( $n=25$ ) codes. From the data, it is clear that experiencing a sense of dependency is multi-dimensional.

One participant shared the following, reflecting their negative perception of TA support and how it takes independence from the student, “You don't feel quite as independent than you were to start with [when working with a TA]” (Francis, Year 11). Within this sub-theme, there could be a dimension whereby independence relates to the student's perception of how a TA can support independence, and this is explored in the discussion section. This participant also shared the following: “Well promoting independence, it's not really how a TA works, because if they do too much, then the learner becomes dependent on the TA” (Francis, Year 11). This student went on to say that if TAs are giving support, then the student is not really being independent. When asked to elaborate on this, they said:

“Because helping is a form of taking independence away, no matter how good the cause may be. If your friend is currently abusing drugs, you stage an intervention, obviously, that's a good cause, but at the end of the day, you are taking their independence away. It's not a bad thing, but the word independence is not dependent, and the learning assistant, one of their aims is to try and help someone and to be there quite often, which can make someone quite dependent”  
(Francis, Year 11)

In terms of producing an answer during learning, one participant shared how, at times, the TA gave the student the answer without explaining it, suggesting an emphasis on task completion from the TA rather than task understanding, and this raises important implications for independence in producing output in learning:

“Um, they, yeah, they can do [TA can give answer without explaining]. Um, although sometimes, um, they just give you the answer without explaining it to you. Um, where if they, uh, sometimes they don't do that, um, they break it down for you and then, um, they let you, um, try and figure out the last like, uh, the last parts of that question, uh, which then would lead up to the answer” (Jonas, Year 10)

With the following participant, the student spoke of how the TA gathers the information from the teacher for them, possibly meaning they could concentrate less on what the teacher was saying, therefore suggesting that the student did not concentrate as much as they knew the TA would gather the information which may be at detriment to the development of independent listening and attention skills:

“...and it's kind of, um, you've got to listen out for some certain things that she says because, um, other things like, it seems like you can almost forget what she says because you've got a supply teacher [TA] there to gather all the information”  
(Jonas, Year 10)

#### ***4.2.3 Subtheme C: Possible increased freedom and independence without TA support***

This sub-theme details the participants' views of how they could have an increased sense of freedom and independence when working without TAs. The subtheme contains ( $n=14$ ) codes and ( $n=6$ ) participants shared their speculative perspectives of having this sense of freedom or expecting what it was like without the TA support. This suggests the participants' may feel, without TA support, a sense of increased autonomy and control over their school experiences across multiple domains; this could include learning and social domains. One participant shared the following when asked about how it would be without the TA, but also recognised the potential negative impact on their learning:

“Well, I could, I’d get like more freedom in a way but at the same time I could get less work done, a bit less work done, sometimes without them, I do get in a bit of trouble, for like, behaviour wise and learning wise, and I don’t understand things”  
(Liam, Year 10)

Similarly, when asked how TA support could be improved for learning in their school, this participant shared “To just let me be more free in a way” (Liam, Year 10), suggesting that their sense of freedom is compressed in the presence of TA support. In relation to this, when one participant was expressing their frustrations at how their TAs engage in supporting them to follow the school rules, feeling controlled by this, the participant shared ‘I think I am my own person and I should be in control of myself. Nobody else’ (George, Year 10).

Additionally, George also expanded on this with the following comment suggesting a need to have separation/space from the TA, especially during recreational periods like breaktimes:

“I really don't like being controlled like at all. Like I, let's say for example the end of break, I'm on my phone and I'm playing a game, I'll just finish up whatever I'm doing and then I'll head off. I'll have a reasonable amount of time. I won't spend like what, 10 minutes on it. I'll just spend two or three minutes just finishing up what I'm doing and then I'll get off to lessons. But I really hate it when like one of

the TAs comes in because obviously we've got our own lunch room where we like eat and that. So the end of break, they come in saying time for lessons, get your stuff, let's clear off things like that. I just like doing things on my own if you know what I mean?" (George, Year 10)

To further add, George, Year 10 also mentioned the way in which TAs can control the behaviour of other students:

"They all [TAs] treat me nicely but, and one thing I get annoyed about is there's this one, uh, TA, she's an TA to multiple students but the people she's an TA too, I've seen her try to like control them and kind of in a way coerced them into doing something they don't want to and don't have to do. I mean it's like some lunches. One of her, well I think yeah one of the students she manages, she says things like, oh do you want to get off your phone, do some revision or some homework, some stuff like that. And I just get really angry at that because obviously it's our lunchtime, we should be free to do what we want. Yeah." (George, Year 10)



#### **4.2.4 Subtheme D: Emotional dependence on TA**

This sub-theme details emotional dependency on the TA themselves. The subtheme contains (n=7) codes from (n=3) participants. For example, one participant whose TA left reflected on how difficult then found school challenging. This participant also shared how much she missed the TA and found other aspects of school harder in the absence on the TA who she had a close relationship with:

“...cuz year nine I struggled really bad but when it came to year 10 I felt like everything was easier, much easier and she made, I felt like her [support] was going amazing. And then since she left, everything has been going more downhill” (Luna, Year 10)

The student also shared that she stopped attending homework club as the TA who left initially encouraged her to do so. Since they left, the student stopped going because they said they did not know anyone there. This reflects the possibility that the student may have been emotionally dependent on the TA to engage in an aspect of school life:

“...there’s a thing called homework club cuz I never used to do my homework cause I used to struggle with it. I couldn’t do it at home with my mum cuz she doesn’t understand it either. So I used to, she [TA] told me to come to this like club place [the homework club] and I would do my homework with her. And then I’ve kind of stopped going because I don’t really have anyone to help me. Even

though there's more teacher assistants in there, it just isn't really the same without the TA]" (Luna, Year 10)

This participant spoke of how they have difficulties regulating their behaviour in the absence of the TA: "I'll stop concentrating [without TA] and that's when I become really silly and I can't concentrate on what I'm doing and she [TA] would be like, well we've gotta do this" (Luna, Year 10), suggesting that the TA also helped motivate them to complete the work. Therefore, this may also infer that this student could have been dependent on the TA to motivate them to an extent.

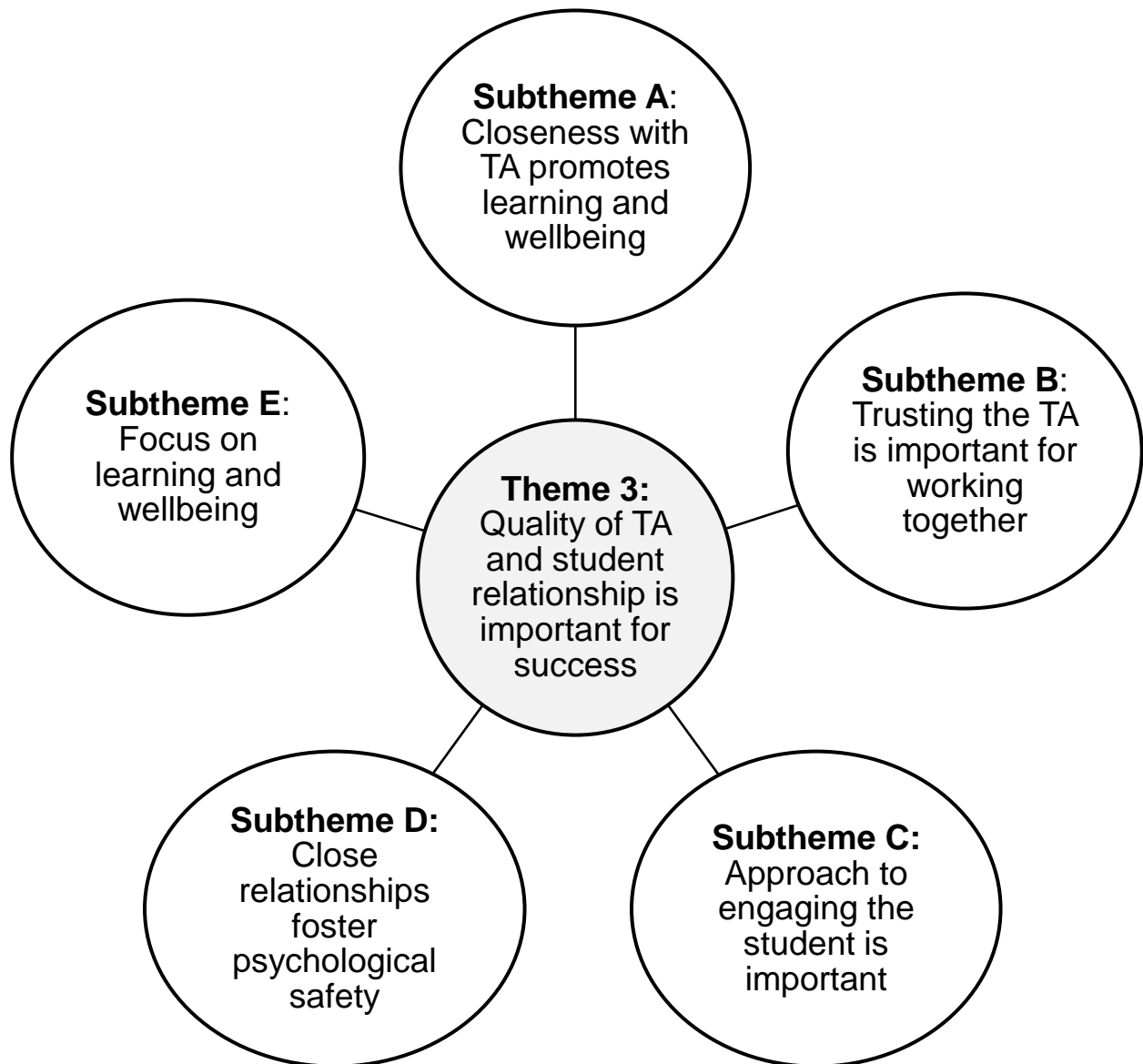
Another participant who shared missing his TA since they left spoke of how he felt attached to her: "She was like the only TA I'd kind of, I almost go like kind of attached her. I'd got on very well with her" (Richard, Year 10). This student also said that they could trust this TA and share feelings with them, but that since they left, they no longer do that with a member of staff. This could suggest an emotional dependency through an intense attachment to the TA which then appeared to impact how he coped with his feelings. After the TA left, they did not feel they could open up to other adults in school and talk about feelings. This could suggest that emotional dependency may have negatively impacted how the student independently managed their feelings (e.g., no longer approaching an adult in school for emotional support).

### **4.3 Theme 3: Quality of TA and student relationship is important for success**

This theme reflects the importance of the strength of the TA to student relationship in facilitating collaborative working and promoting outcomes. The theme contains ( $n=53$ ) codes from ( $n=9$ ) participants. The relationships are characterised by closeness, trust, characteristics of the TA, and psychological safety. There appears to be a link between a quality relationship with the TA and wellbeing. However, wellbeing and relationships were identified as two separate themes to acknowledge the complexity of wellbeing and the range of factors which impact student wellbeing. The thematic map for Theme 3 can be found below in Figure 5.

**Figure 5**

*Thematic Map of Theme 3*



#### **4.3.1 Subtheme A: Closeness with the TA promotes learning and wellbeing**

The subtheme contains ( $n=21$ ) codes from ( $n=8$ ) of ( $n=12$ ) participants in the study. The following participants all reflected on how well they get on with their TAs when they were questioned on what helped them to work well with their TAs: “So of course I had like close, strong connection cause like we just got on and that” (Luna, Year 10)

Additionally, the following participant spoke fondly of his TA which likely demonstrated a close relationship. There appears to be a link between closeness in relationship and the TA being able to then understand the student:

“Well we kind of have like jokes because he thinks he's really good at basketball when in reality he's not. So he has this massive ego about everything. I mean the only thing that I'll give him is he's good at rugby cuz he used to play for England. Yeah. So he is just a chill guy and we joke a lot and he's actually pretty understanding of me. Like. It's quite difficult to understand me cuz I'm a complex person but he gets me” (George, Year 10)

From the following quotes, it is clear that through having a close relationship with their TAs, the students felt more able to engage in learning support with their TA, with one participant describing how having their TA present at homework club helped them to attend, but they stopped going once the TA left, so the TA might have acted as a secure emotional base for the participant:

“...there’s a thing called homework club cuz I never used to do my homework cause I used to struggle with it. I couldn’t do it at home with my mum cuz she doesn’t understand it either. So I used to, she [TA] told me to come to this like club place [the homework club] and I would do my homework with her. And then I’ve kind of stopped going because I don’t really have anyone to help me. Even though there’s more teacher assistants in there, it just isn’t really the same without the TA)” (Luna, Year 10)

Within the sub-theme of closeness, the idea of comfort through close relationships is an important factor in being open to support and being vulnerable in learning, for example, answering a question without understanding what it means, so being comfortable to make mistakes, possibly facilitated by the close relationship with the TA:

“And she’d [TA] like write for me in my tests. Oh okay. Because in my GCSEs I’m supposed to have someone write and read for me. And having it would be nice cause she [TA] told me she was gonna be here till year 11 to help me and she would be the one that I would want her to help me. Cuz like I feel most comfortable with her.” (Luna, Year 10)

“Well it’s almost like talking to a friend [the TA]. Um, you can be a bit more open with them, um, and you can give them a bit more of your [learning] ideas, um, where if you haven’t spent that time with them, um, you can just like, you can

answer a question without fully understanding like what it means, if that makes sense” (Jonas, Year 10)

#### **4.3.2 Subtheme B: Trusting the TA is important for working together**

Trust is a multi-faceted concept, and that very nature is reflected in participant responses. The sub-theme represents the views of the participants and how they placed importance on being able to rely on the TA. This reflects the emotional impact of a caring relationship between the TA and student and how well they work together because of this, and ( $n=5$ ) of the participants spoke about the importance of trust which is represented in ( $n=10$ ) codes.

Two participants said the following when asked if the TA supported wellbeing: “Yeah because uh, you can talk to 'em about like if you trust them you can like talk to 'em about anything really like” (Luna, Year 10) and “I talked to her like I could trust her things. So I don't think any TA can kind of replace her [now she has left]” (Richard, Year 10), and this may reflect an attachment dimension to trust. It is important to note that Richard spoke of how difficult he found it to trust others, which then may have implications for dependency which is considered in the discussion section. For Richard, once the TA who he trusted left, the negative impact of not having that trusted member of staff is reflected in the following extract. He was asked if he talked to other members of staff about his feelings: “Not really. I got involved with them but I didn't trust them that much” (Richard, Year 10). This shows a loss of support, raising implications for the

importance of trust and consistent TA relationships in supporting student wellbeing which are explored in the discussion.

#### ***4.3.3 Subtheme C: Approach to engaging the student is important***

In the context of the relationships theme which contains data from (n=3) participants and (n=12) codes, a sub-theme that emerged in the data was around the importance of the general approach to supporting the student which appeared important in engaging students with the process and in building a successful working relationship. A theme that emerged here was around the general attitude of the TA. Being overly strict and serious, as participants described, could be an issue. It appeared that the participants generally preferred a more relaxed approach from the TA which involved humour. For example, one participant said “I mean I've got a different TA this year and he's, he's a better TA. He's much more chill [compared to the previous TA]” (George, Year 10). This participant also went on to share the following when asked what else he preferred about the current TA. The previous TA was more focused on learning and took a more serious approach to supporting the student. The new TA appeared to be more relaxed which the student appreciated:

“I mean the old one [previous TA], obviously I said about the spreadsheet but the new one just says, oh can you make sure you get this homework done? Things like that just like pulls me out of like break time or something. And the new one,



like we have like some jokes and everything and the old one was just always super serious” (George, Year 10)

This idea of humour being helpful when working together and taking a less-serious approach to interacting with students was also spoken about by another participant when asked what made it easy for her to talk to her TA about feelings: “Just cuz she wasn't that serious like, oh well teachers are quite serious about work. She was serious when we had to do the work but she knew how to have a laugh at the same time” (Luna, Year 10).

#### ***4.3.4 Subtheme D: Close relationships foster psychological safety***

This sub-theme can be defined by the sense that in any relationship, through healthy connection, an individual feels safe in being able to trust and rely on an individual and know that the relationship provides an emotional protection. The subtheme contains ( $n=5$ ) codes from ( $n=4$ ) participants who shared their views when asked about how TAs support wellbeing which implied that TAs provide such safety. One participant spoke of how they had a safe space with their TA, meaning that they felt a sense of emotional containment from them: “I think it's cuz kind of like have a safe space cuz it used to be I'm just here, I'm isolated in a way, but now there's like a little safe space” (George, Year 10), and when asked to elaborate on what a safe space meant to him, he said the following:

“It's like a feeling cuz obviously he's a chill person and that just kind of like makes me forget about things in a way. Yeah. Like when I'm having fun or let's say on a game you're focusing on something, you just forget about everything. Or when you like have like a rush of energy or whatever, then you just forget about things”  
(George, Year 10)

#### **4.3.5 Subtheme E: Focus on learning and wellbeing**

This sub-theme is an aspect of the TA-to-student relationship identified by ( $n=2$ ) participants and can be defined as knowing that the TA holds the student in mind and cares about them and their welfare in addition to their learning/schooling. There is an aspect of being looked after and student knowing that the TA considers more than just their learning. The subtheme contains ( $n=5$ ) codes. One participant spoke of how the relationship with a previous TA was challenging as the focus was only on learning and not wellbeing: “I mean it was like they only really cared about the work and everything. Not about like me as a person” (George, Year 10). However, with the new TA, the participant spoke fondly of them and their close relationship, sharing the following which highlights the importance of the TA caring for the student and their wellbeing, taking the time to check in:

“I'd say it's hard to explain but I think it's, cuz obviously we have our like laughs and everything and like he's, he's just nice. Yeah. He's, he doesn't just care about the work. Like obviously after the discussions we have about homework

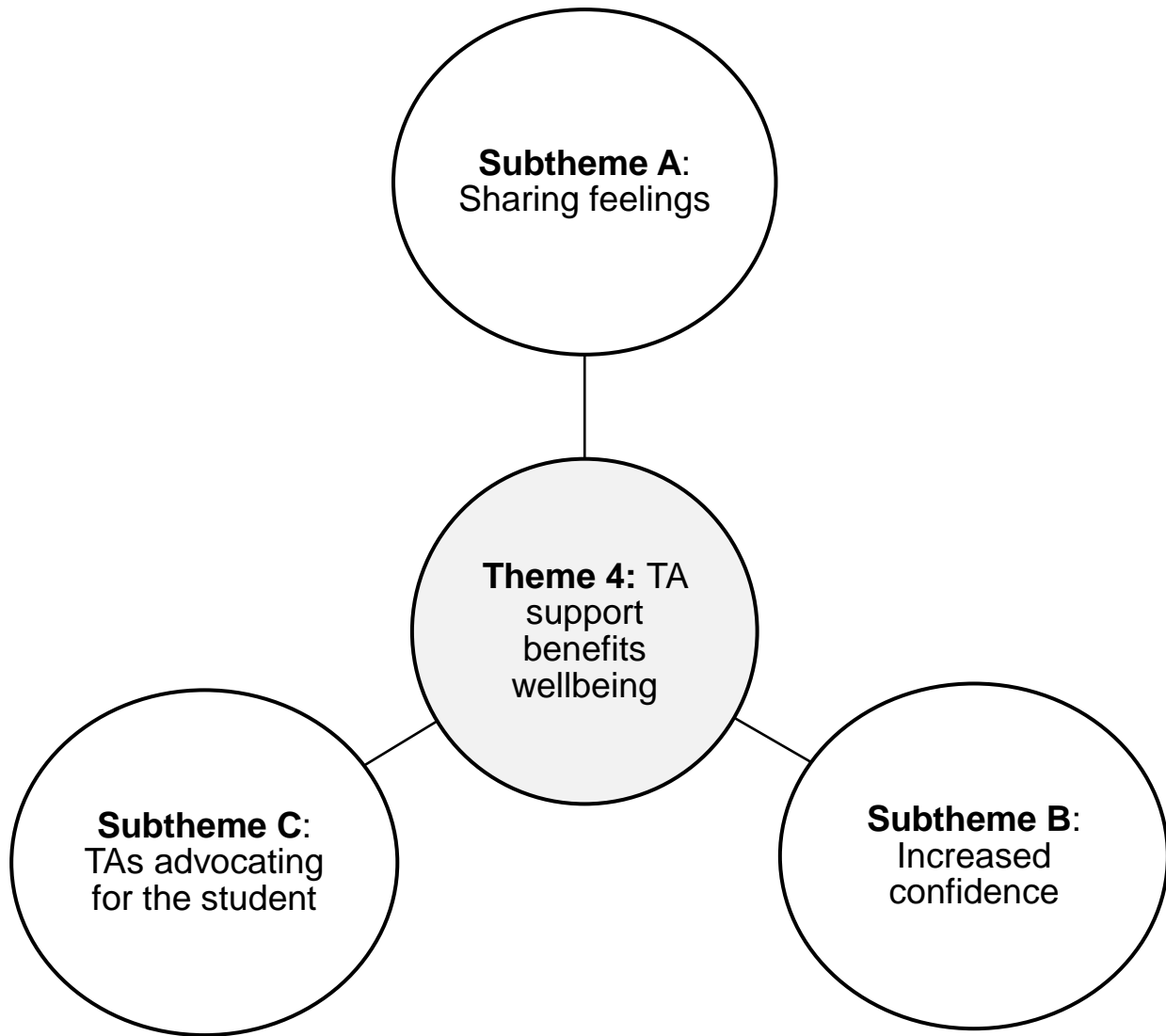
and that he just checks up like putting all like the work and stuff aside. He just says are you, are you okay? Like is there anything you need to talk about? Yeah. Whereas my last TA was just like, oh, that's the work bye" (George, Year 10)

#### **4.4 Theme 4: TA support benefits wellbeing**

This theme captures the view that TA support appeared to have a self-reported positive impact on the wellbeing of participants who were able to explicitly identify this. The theme contains ( $n=39$ ) codes from ( $n=8$ ) participants. The theme highlights the multi-dimensional nature of how TAs support wellbeing specifically and the opportunities they can create for this. The responses fell within three sub-themes which are mapped in Figure 6.

**Figure 6**

*Thematic Map of Theme 4*



#### **4.4.1 Subtheme A: Sharing feelings**

This subtheme contains ( $n=23$ ) codes from ( $n=8$ ) participants and the data here suggests that sharing feelings with the TA supports student wellbeing. They acknowledged that they talked about their feelings with TAs which they identified as supporting their wellbeing. The support mechanism appears to vary when sharing their feelings, and it seems from the data that sharing feelings creates opportunities for the participants to have someone listen to them, be non-judgemental over their feelings, seek validation and confirmation of their perspective, receive an objective point of view, provide a distraction, and help the participant understand their feelings. When talking about how TAs support wellbeing, one pupil said the following: “But then also how she’s [TA] just kind of someone to talk to as well which you find quite reassuring” (Christopher, Year 11)

This view was echoed by other participants who valued the reassurance from their respective TAs. One participant shared the following when speaking of how TA support had a positive impact on her wellbeing: “...they [TA] say it will be fine [when stressed]” (Michelle, Year 10). Another participant said the following on reassurance from TAs:

“...but yeah, it's just trying to firstly get the initial feeling that maybe having someone there to inform you that, that it's just, it'll be good and nothing awful is gonna happen in that moment entirely” (Sol, Year 10)

From the data, the mechanisms by which sharing feelings helps wellbeing is clearly varied and facilitated by the TA in terms of their response when the participant talked about their feelings. For example, utilising the TA as someone to give unbiased perspectives on a dilemma was found to be helpful, which was identified by the following participant:

“...you just get so caught up in your own head and you’ve got someone there who has got the clearness of not being involved in it who is able to give a, I don’t want to say unbiased view, because of course it will be biased, but someone who is able to put a bit more rational thought into it” (Christopher, Year 11)

Additionally, it seems particularly important to have TAs take a non-judgmental approach which likely makes it easier to share feelings. This participant shared the following when asked what they found helpful about talking to the TA about feelings:

“Just easy because like you do know them but at the same time it's not like, it's hard to explain. It's not like they're gonna judge you or anything because you don't really like know them like that. Like Yeah. Just easy” (Luna, Year 10)

#### **4.4.2 Subtheme B: Increased confidence**

There appears to be a link between TA support and increased confidence. Although one of the smaller sub-themes in this main theme, ( $n=2$ ) participants noticed that their confidence had increased since receiving TA support. There are ( $n=9$ ) codes in the subtheme. One student was asked how TA support helped their wellbeing, and they described how they were scared to ask for anything in class and they barely talked in there, but having a TA has supported with this, which can be viewed as increased social confidence:

“Yeah, um, helps me help me build up the confidence to talk and I'll say and ask an adult when I need help. It [TA support] helps me build up confidence to say when I need help” (June, Year 10)

In terms of the mechanisms used by TAs to support confidence, one participant shared how their TA encouraged them to use self-talk as a tool to improve their confidence, thus providing a valuable insight into how TAs can build the independence of the students they work with to help face challenges:

“They also help with, with working on self-talk. Mainly when it is like, um, a situation that's stressful for myself. Um, for an example, um, I've got a, a head boy interview with the head of year and head teacher coming up as well. So I'm

trying to get my head around that as well. Trying to use the self-talk as well” (Sol, Year 10)

#### **4.4.3 Subtheme C: TAs advocating for the student**

The data suggested that TAs have an advocate role which may be linked to improved wellbeing for the students they work with. The subtheme contains ( $n=7$ ) codes from ( $n=3$ ) participants. This means that the TA can raise awareness of the student’s needs in school to other members of staff and how support can be tailored to fit their profile.

Three participants spoke about this aspect of the TA role explicitly:

“I knew I really struggle that I've done it lots of times. Okay. But, you know, having someone there and even just go on communicates to people that, you know, that he is doing his best” (Christopher, Year 11)

“I think maybe get, cuz obviously he [TA] does have some power and he can say like, what I like and dislike and things. Maybe you can get the teachers to stop being so like oppressive in a way. Because that's what kind of like stresses me out in school. Just being oppressed by teachers” (George, Year 10) and “Well um, of course she told all my teachers not to pick on me cause I don't like it” (Luna, Year 10)



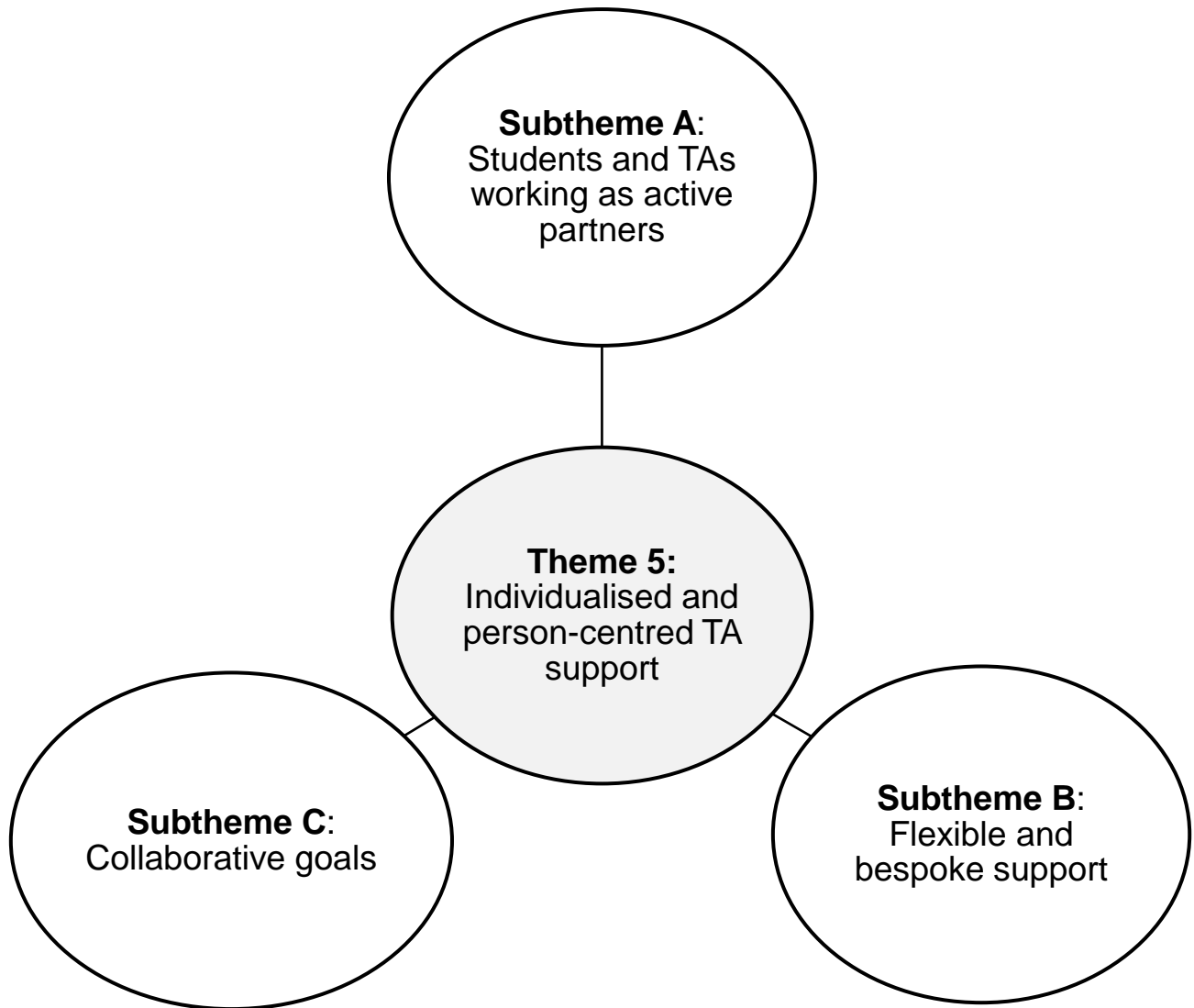
This data highlights how the TA can have influence on the systems around the student and promote the student's views to potentially deliver support in a person-centred way.

#### **4.5 Theme 5: Individualised and person-centred TA support**

This theme contains ( $n=34$ ) codes from ( $n=8$ ) participants and refers to the idea of TA support being personalised to fit the needs of the student and the need to action pupil views so that the TA and student can work collaboratively to achieve goals. The theme consists of three sub-themes detailed below in Figure 7.

**Figure 7**

*Thematic Map of Theme 5*



#### **4.5.1 Subtheme A: Students and TAs working as active partners (n=14)**

This sub-theme details the perspective that participants gave around feeling that TAs should only give support to the student when they require it and/or when they have asked for it which has implications for independence that are outlined in the discussion. This suggests a need for TAs to be partners in the support, meaning that they should be actively involved in deciding how TA support should be delivered, for example, when they get support. The subtheme consists of (n=14) codes from (n=8) of the (n=12) participants, suggesting that this was a strong sub-theme in the data. When two participants were asked how TA learning support could improve, they said the following: "...be there when they need" (Francis, Year 11) and that TAs should give support in the following way: "As and when it's needed. Not like constantly" (Liam, Year 10).

There is also a dimension of consent to this sub-theme, indicating that it may be important for students to agree to receiving TA support in the first place, and this was mentioned by one participant when sharing what could make TA learning support better:

"...so you know, what actually helps them or not, because, for example, some people absolutely hate it and just want to be left alone to do the work, and some people you know desperately need the help. So definitely understand the person you're working with" (Alex, Year 10)

“Uhh, that, if, uh, that some people, they like having teaching assistants, but I know for some people, they really don't, and they prefer to be left alone. So, take into account what person you're supporting. Because they might absolutely not want the help, or well...” (Alex, Year 10)

#### **4.5.2 Subtheme B: Flexible and bespoke support**

This refers to the importance of the TA giving support in a way that is malleable and responsive to the needs of the student as opposed to taking a universal approach to supporting students, and ( $n=5$ ) of the participants gave views in this area which are represented in ( $n=10$ ) codes. When one participant was asked how TA support for learning could be better, he said the following:

“Try help them learn in the own way” (Francis, Year 11), and when asked to elaborate, he said “Well in essence let me do their work in my own way. If it's productive and shows everything the teachers wants, whether it be a spider diagram, a chart, a graph, or a paragraph, it's fine. If it's got all the information required, then it's fine” (Francis, Year 11)

Additionally, another participant reflected on how TAs should support students to engage in the learning process in a way that suits their needs, and have the flexibility to allow them to take a different approach. This same student spoke of how TAs and the

SEND department are there to help students learn in a different way because that is what neurodivergent students need:

“...if you've got a good TA and a good teacher, you'll see that student really does well. Yeah. And they've got a back bone structure where it's kind of like okay I have to get there [finish the learning task], you can go anywhere you want [complete it any way you want]” (Imran, Year 10)

#### **4.5.3 Subtheme C: Collaborative goals**

This subtheme reflects the need for the student and TA to work towards collaborative goals. The subtheme contains ( $n=10$ ) codes from ( $n=1$ ) participant. Within this, there is also an apparent benefit for engagement when the student understands why they are working with a TA and understanding the purpose and function of their role which one student gave their views on. The following student spoke of how the student and TA need to have a good understanding and that the TA should help the student work towards their goals:

“For an TA to be generally like useful and helpful and helping you become more independent, is, there has to be a good understanding between the TA and just doing like, not like a strict backbone, but like I'm here to help you with whatever your goals are” (Imran, Year 10)

There is a motivational dimension to this sub-theme whereby if a student understands the purpose and the TA and student are aligned in their goals, they will engage more, reflecting self-determination theory which one of the underpinning models for the current study:

“I know like, so with Ms. X [TA] I know that her and my goals generally line up. Like if she's doing something, that's probably a good reason that it should, should probably start doing this for my own good as well” (Imran, Year 10)

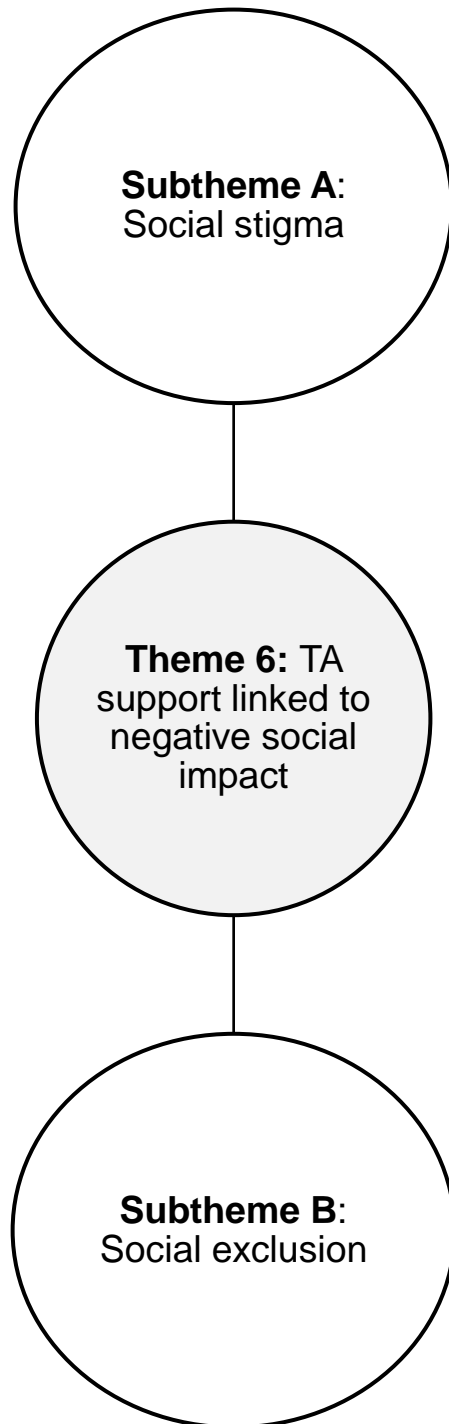
“Synchronisation. Like what, what to expect of yourself and what the teacher kind of expect from, not expectation, but working towards the same goal, like almost like I know she's [TA] trying to help me and like there's a specific structure to it. So I should probably adhere to that structure because I know that it's gonna help me in the future. So it's kind of a learning curve in this aspect like, depend... if you can get your learn, if you can understand how what your TA generally wants to such a level, you know like okay I'll do this because I know it will help with that and so that we can work together [the TA and student] and I'll get better” (Imran, Year 10)

#### **4.6 Theme 6: TA support is linked to negative social impact**

Despite participants mostly having positive perceptions of the support received from TAs, there were some reports of how receiving support from TAs negatively impacted the social experience of the participants. Although the current study conceptualised social support under wellbeing, social exclusion was identified as a theme separate to Theme 4 on wellbeing support due to the significance of social exclusion in the data. The subtheme consists of ( $n=21$ ) codes across two sub-themes from ( $n=5$ ) participants. The thematic map is represented below in Figure 8.

**Figure 8**

*Thematic Map of Theme 6*





#### **4.6.1 Subtheme A: Social stigma**

This sub-theme details the negative perceptions that other students may have towards TA support and how this could impact the way they view the student receiving it, and ( $n=4$ ) participants spoke of the social stigma. The subtheme contains ( $n=12$  codes). For example, one student reported the following when asked how it would be if they did not have TA support anymore:

“It would not make much of a difference really. As in like I could just get more independent, uh yeah, and my friends just think that I’m sort of a, a bit of a, they think that I’m a bit of a retard for getting support [from a TA]” (Liam, Year 10)

Building on this, one participant shared how they feel scared asking for help from TAs, and when asked why, they said “I don’t know, it makes me feel like I might get judged” (June, Year 10).

Two students shared feeling embarrassed when receiving TA support, and this was linked to wondering how others perceived the student for needing the support: “Erm like when I say to the TA can you come here, I feel a bit embarrassed because everyone looks” (Michelle, Year 10).

When asked how TA support could be better, one student said: “...and for them to not always like stand by me because it’s a bit embarrassing for me because yeah in front of

my friends” (Liam, Year 10). One issue which seems to impact on social stigma is proximity which is the physical distance between the student and the TA. It appears that close proximity may be linked to social stigma and embarrassment. The same student also spoke of the need for the TA to only come near when the student needed support, and this was due to feeling embarrassed with having the TA near him in front of his friends, thus demonstrating a challenging emotional response to having TA support:

“So they’re not sitting next to me and I’m sitting at the back, and when I put my hand up, they can come down and help me, and for them to now always like stand by me because it’s a bit embarrassing for me because yeah in front of my friends, but usually it’s pretty good, it’s just um them staying a bit away from me and when I put my hand up they then come near me and help me not them sitting next to me sitting there, but when I put my hand up, then they can come down and help me” (Liam, Year 10)

#### **4.6.2 Subtheme B: Social exclusion**

This sub-theme details how ( $n=2$ ) participants perceived that working with TAs impacted their social connections in school, sharing both physical and emotional factors. The subtheme contains ( $n=9$ ) codes. For example, one participant shared how they have to sit separately from their peers when receiving TA support and that this was isolating for them. This participant also spoke of how this set up was frustrating for him:

“Yeah so say if there’s a cover lesson and I sit with my friends and they aren’t being sat in their usual position/seats, it just ends up being me moved to the front and what that would do to me is I just end up being annoyed” (Liam, Year 10)

“Everyone’s just sitting with their friends and mates and it’s just me sat at the front, no one else to talk to. There’s just like no interaction with the rest of the class, it’s like I’m being a bit isolated, a bit like isolation”  
(Liam, Year 10)

A similar view was echoed by another participant who spoke of feeling nervous when being grouped with other students who need TA support, away from the rest of the class, reflecting a challenging emotional response to separation from peers and receiving TA support: “In a way it's kind of nerve wracking for me because um, it kind of feels like you are being separated from the rest of the class” (Jonas, Year 10)

# Chapter 5 – Discussion

## 5.1 Research questions (RQs)

***5.1.1 RQ1: What do pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for their wellbeing?***

Evidence emerging from thematic analysis strongly suggested that TAs had a positive impact on the wellbeing of the CYP they support. The benefits included the value in talking about feelings, relationships, and increased confidence. The importance and value in being able to talk about your feelings with a paraprofessional is consistent with prior research (de boer & Kuijper, 2021; Dillon et al., 2016; Krause et al., 2020; Hills, 2016). The current study suggested that the potential reassurance sought when sharing feelings and management of feelings was helpful. Also, there appeared to be a benefit in being able to seek an unbiased and objective perspective on a dilemma from the TA as well as being listened to, understood, and not being judged. Through these interactions with TAs, it could be that pupils are experiencing a sense of containment which links back to containment theory (Bion, 1962). Within the framework of the containment theory (Bion, 1962), this is where an individual expresses their overwhelming feelings to someone else and they perceive their feelings being handled in a calm way. They then see those feelings reflected back in a more manageable form by this person; this could be what was happening in these interactions between TAs

and participants. Following on from this, there was a theme around having a sense of safety in the relationship with the ELSA, and the sessions provided the students with a safe and positive space. Emotional safety is a key component of healthy relationships (Gottman et al., 2014).

The findings indicate that relationships between TAs and pupils are of paramount importance. It appeared that forming a close bond helped the student to develop a sense of comfort and trust. Trusting the TA was linked to an improved working relationship and being able to talk about feelings with the TA. Overall, these findings may reflect an increased sense of psychological safety for the student. This is linked to previous findings which suggested that sessions with TAs who also have ELSA roles provided a sense of emotional safety (Krause et al., 2020). It is an established notion that emotional safety is a key component of healthy relationships (Gottman et al., 2014), Also, these findings are consistent with Saggars (2015) who highlighted that close relationships between students and school staff can increase the student's sense of comfort. In terms of an implication, there needs to be a focus placed on building the TA-to-pupil relationship, and especially trust, in order to facilitate a strong, working relationship which is characterised by mutual respect.

In terms of areas for development, the factors of social stigma, social exclusion, and autonomy are pertinent. The findings suggested that social stigma can impact the wellbeing of students and elicit feelings of embarrassment and self-consciousness, which is consistent with findings from a range of previous studies highlighting the

associated embarrassment and the student not wanting to be seen as different (Broer et al., 2005; Webster & Blatchford, 2017), and these factors could decrease engagement with TA support. One participant explicitly reported that their friends think they are a “retard” because they receive TA support, and generally, this participant presented as being rejecting of his TA support. The self-consciousnesses and stigma associated with TA support reported by other participants may reflect the potential impact that the perceptions of others may have on how students engage in TA support.

There was an interesting finding around how TA support may be a barrier to peer-to-peer interactions which raises questions around the opportunity for students to develop friendships with peers when they receive TA support, and the potential for TA support to increase social exclusion. These findings contrasted previous studies which suggested that TA support can facilitate social inclusion and increase social interaction between students (Hemmingson et al., 2003; Tews & Lupart, 2008). Research clearly reflects the importance of students having friendships and how this can lead to improved wellbeing (Laursen & Hartup, 2002; Masten et al., 2005), including an increased sense of belonging at school (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019). Reduced opportunities to build relationships with peers due to TA support could potentially decrease the student’s sense of belonging. From the findings, there is a clear need to deploy TA support carefully to promote social inclusion and reduce the risk of TA support interfering with the student’s opportunity to interact with their peers.

The role of the ELSA is clear in building emotional literacy, with evidence supporting the positive effects of the intervention on wellbeing (Krause et al., 2020). The current study suggests an emerging role for TAs who support wellbeing in combination with learning outside of ELSA interventions, perhaps in a more impromptu manner when compared to a structured intervention such as ELSA. Further study is required to explore the techniques used by TAs in such scenarios and how the role may develop to support wellbeing without the need for ELSA training.

***5.1.2 RQ2: What do KS4 pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for building independence in wellbeing?***

There are few relevant findings on wellbeing independence from the current study. It must be noted that participants generally found it challenging to talk about this concept, possibly due to difficulties understanding it. In terms of the relevant findings, there was a minor theme of emotional dependency in the data which appears to be novel in this field on literature based on the studies reviewed for the thesis. There seems to be an attachment dynamic to emotional dependency whereby one particular student identified as being intensely attached to their TA which then seemed to have an impact on their ability to manage their own emotional needs independently. This is also linked to the sub-theme of trust in the sense that this student trusted their TA and shared feelings with them. However, once the TA left, they said that did not really open up about their feelings as they struggled trusting others. Therefore, they may have then been less able

to seek emotional support from a school-based adult, suggesting a possible decrease in emotional independence. For this student, it is important to note that their response to no longer working with the TA is arguably normal and healthy. They seemed to build a trusting relationship, and to then no longer have access to the emotional support that comes from such a relationship is arguably challenging for an individual to process. For an individual to become independent, they first need to be dependent. For this student, it could be said that the apparent dependency was an essential stage to process, and that he would then have the opportunity to build independence. This highlights a role for the school system in developing the emotional independence of students they work with. For example, when students work with TAs, it is important that the school plans for how the student can build their support network in school so that they trust and open up to others, not just the TA, and to also process their intense feelings that come from building attachment to a TA. It is also essential that schools support students to manage their wellbeing independently where appropriate and necessary. This is particularly important for TA-to-student relationships where there may be an end point for the support, for example, a fixed amount of time for a TA to work with a student. Therefore, in summary, this particular example emphasises the need for the school system to be proactive in developing the emotional independence of students which links back to the influence of the systems around young people in supporting them with their learning and wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

For the student above, it could be that although trust seemingly helped the student to connect with their TA and provide a source of emotional support, it may be that there is



a risk of dependency. The finding around the importance of trust is unique to this study and was not reported in the research reviewed for the thesis. Therefore, it is important for TAs to consider taking steps to ensure the TA-to-student relationship is sensitive and boundaried. Expanding on the previous point on how it is necessary to first be dependent to then become independent, TAs need to be aware of the complexities of identity development and how this may heighten the risk of emotional dependency. TAs must ensure they are providing emotional support which allows the student to work towards being independent in managing their wellbeing. Navigating the KS4 landscape is arguably complex due to a myriad of factors; these include learning demands from examinations and also the strains that identity development and social pressures place on young people of this age. Adults working with young people in this age range must be privy to all these factors in order to best support the students holistically and systemically while helping them to work towards independence.

It is important to recognise the role of confidence in facilitating a sense of independence in students. One of the emerging themes following analysis was around how TA support led to increased confidence with learning, and although this is explored within the learning section of the discussion, confidence also relates to autonomy and competence, and could be considered a key component of wellbeing independence. For example, one student spoke of how their increased confidence following TA support helped them to ask an adult in school for help, thus implying an impact on the student's ability to be an advocate for their own learning needs by developing confidence which is a component of wellbeing. The finding of increased confidence is consistent with

previous research which has identified the role of the TA in helping build confidence (de Boer & Kuijper, 2021; Krause et al. 2020).

***5.1.3 RQ3: What do pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for their learning?***

The most prominent theme emerging from analysis was that TAs largely have a positive impact on learning. However, it appeared that there were challenges with TA support in supporting learning which are also discussed in this chapter. In terms of some of the more general findings which were consistent with the available literature, the main themes for how TA learning support benefitted learning were around support for comprehension, engagement, task completion, and organisation and planning. For example, with engagement, the majority of participants detailed how TA support helped them engage in learning in terms of their attention which is consistent with findings from Jarvis (2003) and de Boer and Kuijper (2020). However, the mechanisms behind how TAs facilitated engagement are unclear in terms of the current study's findings. Notably, the individuals who were found to have increased engagement linked to TA support also exhibited a close relationship with the TA, as evidenced by their favourable portrayals of them. This links to the prominent theme of relationships, and there could be a link between strong relationships and engagement in learning overall, which raises implications for the importance of positive connections between TAs and pupils, further

emphasising the interplay between learning and wellbeing, and the duality of the TA role across the two domains.

There was a theme around advocacy, detailing how TAs may act as advocates to support the students they work with, and this may benefit both learning and wellbeing. Interestingly, the idea of TAs as advocates has only been reported briefly in the literature considered for the current study, noting how TAs described part of their role in terms of advocacy and mediation between systems around the child, including both home and school (Webster & Blatchford, 2017). The current study suggested the idea of TA as advocates for CYP with SEND, but from the perspectives of the pupil. There was an implied positive impact whereby the TA can use their position in the school system to communicate the needs of the student and support other professionals, for example, teachers, in adapting their approach, suggesting that TAs may be able to promote the learning and wellbeing of students by collaborating with other professionals in the microsystem. The students described how the TAs had communicated with teachers, sharing information about their views and contextual information to help teachers to modify their support, and one of the participants shared how this was successful in setting up more suitable testing arrangements for them. Therefore, in terms of implications, these findings highlight the importance of person-centred approaches and the role that TAs have in facilitating them through promoting the views of the students they work with.

In terms of areas for developing learning support, TA knowledge of the lesson area was identified as a challenge, as well as the availability and access to TA support in class. This links to previous research which identified the factors which may affect the impact of TAs, however, this was identified by other stakeholders, not the pupils themselves. The wider pedagogical role model identified one of these factors as lack of preparedness in TAs in terms of them not understanding the lesson content ahead of time (Blatchford et al., 2009; Webster et al., 2011). Therefore, this finding is unique to the current study.

***5.1.4 RQ4: What do KS4 pupils with SEND think is working well and what are the areas for development in terms of the one-to-one TA support they receive for building independence in learning?***

In terms of supporting student independence in learning, there is a theme encapsulating how some participants displayed a dependency on TA support, and within the theme of learning independence, the data highlighted a stronger theme of dependency and decreased freedom than increased independence. However, there was some evidence implying that fading support helped learning independence. This is consistent with previous research detailing the importance of fading support and the link to increased independence in that the fading then reduces the dependency on prompts from others to elicit an independent behaviour in learning (Cooper et al., 2019). In the current study, one participant reported that their TA support gradually reduced over time which

supported them to get used to being without it, and subsequently, then feeling like they could manage without the support.

There is an emerging theme around the student understanding the purpose of TA support, and the potential importance of having shared goals. One participant spoke of how his and the TA's goals for him aligned, which appeared to facilitate motivation in engaging with support. This can be viewed through the lens of the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and again, there appeared to be an element of trust in the relationship here which seemed to be important in engaging with support. For instance, the participant spoke of how if the TA is supporting with a specific area, that they [the student] should engage with this for their own benefit, because there is a reason to it in the sense of trusting the TA had their best interests in mind. This same participant then shared how the TA supported him to be more independent with planning and organisation. Therefore, this implies a benefit of transparency in supporting independence, and also, the importance of considering the student's intrinsic motivations and what is important to them to then promote engagement and a collaborative working relationship between the TA and student. The student recognised the value of being independent with planning and organizing, and therefore engaged with TA support to develop this skill. This finding has implications for the use of person-centred approaches in the deployment of TA support, the value of which are identified in the CFA 2014 and the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015). The current study appears to evidence how they can be effective.

Other emerging findings are around the negative impact of TA over-support on learning independence. Additionally, the importance of the proximity of TA to student, the student's sense of freedom and autonomy, and adopting person-centred approaches in TA support were highlighted. There is a theme in the findings around how, without TAs, some participants reported they do, or may feel, an increased sense of freedom and independence, suggesting they feel/felt less positive in close proximity to the TA, and potentially less free and independent. It could be that, for these participants, there may be a lower sense of control in the presence of the TA which could explain why they reported how they might/do feel an increased sense of freedom and independence without them. It was not clear if these participants made their views known to the TA, but research has highlighted how students who did not feel listened to by TAs had a lower sense of autonomy (Skär & Tamm, 2001). This finding that some student feel/felt less free and independent without TA support, suggesting that they felt negative in these respects when with TA, contrasts with findings from Tews & Lupart (2008) who found that half of the participants in their study felt positively about the close proximity of the TAs. This difference could be down to the strength of the relationship between the TA and student as the importance of relationships was identified as a main theme in the current study. However, the authors also noted that this signified dependency. These findings raise implications for the importance of autonomy and control and they can be conceptualised through the locus of control theory (Rotter, 1954, 1966).

Relating back to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) there is a clear negative implication for when individuals feel a lack of agency over their lives in that it

can impact their feeling of freedom and could decrease engagement. Therefore, it is important to consider how to develop a sense of autonomy and control when working with TAs as this could be linked to increased perceived independence and sense of freedom.

Another prominent theme in the data was the desire for TAs to only support when necessary from the pupil's perspective which was captured in the subtheme on how students should be partners in TA support. The data within the sub-theme implied that the TA often supported when they felt necessary, indicating that this was not when the pupil felt it was necessary, thus highlighting a potential mismatch between the TA support and the perceived necessity of it by the student. Within the sub-theme was the dimension of consent, so agreeing to be supported and wanting to engage in that process. These findings are similar to Broer et al. (2005) in that there was a disdain for the constancy of TA support, again suggesting support was received when not wanted by the student. The finding around wanting to only receive TA support as necessary could also be implying the need for the proximity of the TA to the pupil to be considered in delivering support. This data suggested the need for the TA to only approach the pupil when they needed support and to otherwise keep a distance. This was linked to feelings of embarrassment for the pupil which is consistent with previous findings around the social stigma associated with TA support (Broer et al., 2005; Webster & Blatchord, 2019), thus highlighting the link between wellbeing and learning for students. The importance of TA-to-student proximity has been identified in previous findings

(Hemmingson et al., 2003). They highlighted how greater proximity can be used as a tool to support the independence of pupils.

Therefore, in terms of areas for development, it could be that the participants from the current study were indirectly communicating a need for agency and having their views considered as part of their support, thus potentially further emphasising the need for person-centred approaches in TA support. Following on from this, another point for consideration is the possibility of over support, which is linked to possibly experiencing unnecessary levels of support which may hamper learning independence. For instance, there were some reports of TAs giving students answers instead of supporting them to come to the conclusion themselves which made them feel less independent in learning. Previous research has suggested TAs do the work for students, with a possible reason being to keep the student up with the class (Hemmingson et al. 2003), suggesting a focus on task completion rather than learning. This finding from the current study may relate to the TA keeping the student on track with the pace of the lesson which has been previously identified in literature (Broer et al. 2005). There may be implications for the clarity of the TA role and expectations of student performance. Related to this, some participants explicitly stated that they wanted to have opportunities to be independent and that this could involve being given more opportunities to work through learning activities alone, thus demonstrating the importance of considering pupil voice.

Linking this back to the overarching theme of relationships and the sub-theme of focus on both learning and wellbeing, the finding around how it is important for the TA to focus



on the wellbeing of the individual instead of just considering learning success is important here. This suggests the need for students to work with a professional who they perceive cares for their wellbeing as well as their learning. It is important to link the two as the findings may suggest an over-emphasis on learning, which may not only compromise learning independence, for example, the TA completing the work to keep the student on task, but also may lead to lower levels of engagement in TA support if the student feels the focus is solely on learning. This highlights the necessity for TA support to consider both the welfare and learning of the student they support.

### **5.5 Strengths of the study**

One particular strength of the current study is that it provided findings to address the literature gap around the perspectives of students from the KS4 phase of education around TA support, an understanding which is under-represented specifically in this field, particularly combining the views on support received for both learning and wellbeing, and independence in both areas.

### **5.6 Limitations**

The sample size ( $n=12$ ) of the current study raises limitations for the generalisability of the findings as the sample is relatively small, meaning that the findings are not widely generalisable. Additionally, the study was conducted in one local authority in the South East of England, meaning that it may not be possible to generalise the findings to

different contexts, for example, an inner-city LA. Instead, the idea of transferable findings may be more useful to consider than generalisability, arguably allowing the reader to decide whether the findings may apply to their context and thus have implications for their setting. The idea of transferability being a more useful concept in qualitative research when applying findings was stated by Braun & Clarke (2022). A second limitation of the study relates to social desirability in the data. For instance, it could have been that the participants felt the need to portray TA support overly-positively for a myriad of reasons, such as not wanting to represent the TA negatively due to a potential concern that the school may find out. In addition, a third limitation of the study is that there is only data from one source, which is the students. Although the current study deliberately focused on student views alone to promote their voice in research, collecting information from other sources, such as parents/carers and teachers, may have led to richer findings. Other sources of data that may have added depth to the findings includes collecting information on the academic progress of the sample. This could have then provided interesting triangulation between student views of the effectiveness of TA support by comparing their perspectives to their progress towards individual outcomes, both for learning and wellbeing. This may have then allowed the study to link perceived effectiveness to student outcomes and progression towards them.

## 5.7 Directions for future research

Further research is required to further understand how KS4 students perceive TA support for learning and wellbeing. There needs to be a focus on the area of wellbeing independence as much is arguably unknown about how TAs support this area. It may also be useful for mixed-method approaches to be adopted in future study in order to triangulate findings and provide points of enquiry for interviews with students to ensure a potentially more thorough exploration of TA support. For instance, it could be said that much of TA support for wellbeing is implicit rather than having a clear, tangible structure. For example, the importance of building relationships, although not a prescribed intervention per se, clearly is of paramount value in supporting the wellbeing and learning of students. Therefore, in a mixed-method study, researchers may find value in carrying out systematic observations of TA support and also interviewing other stakeholders before students so that more subtle of areas can be explored with the student if revealed in prior stages of data collection, which could potentially facilitate a more detailed exploration of TA support. Combining quantitative and qualitative measures may increase the validity and reliability of research. Research in this field has collected retrospective perceptions of TA support several years after the individual received their TA support. In the current study, it was difficult for participants to reflect on the concept of wellbeing independence and provide their views, and this could be due to age. Another way of overcoming this may be for future research to consider implementing a retrospective approach as this may improve the richness and quality of the findings. However, there may be difficulties with participants remembering their

experiences, so the approach taken in the current study to ask participants about current experiences may be a stronger approach to data collection. Alternatively, researchers could find different ways to better articulate the complex concepts found in this area of research.

## **5.8 Dissemination**

With regards to disseminating the findings, the researcher will present the findings to their doctoral colleagues, placement service, and participating schools. The research will also be prepared for publication following examination.

## **5.9 Implications for practice**

The following section outlines the implications of the research through recommended good practice for TA support and how they could be supported to improve their effectiveness. There are several implications for schools, educational psychologists, Local Authorities, and the government which are outlined below. It is necessary to add that the implications below only reflect the current study, which has a small sample size and was conducted in one local authority in England. It is essential that the reader focuses on how findings may transfer to their context rather than generalise.

### **5.9.1 Considerations for schools**

- It will be important for schools to consider ways in which pupil views can inform the TA support they receive at each stage, for example, whilst co-constructing the support and also at the point of review
- Schools must hold a termly review of the TA support and ensure that the pupil is appropriately involved in this. Schools may want to consider implementing a person-centred review as part of this process
- Schools must ensure an ongoing dialogue between the student and the relevant stakeholders to ensure that the approach can be adapted where necessary without having to wait for a review
- It is essential that students consent to TA support, and if they do not want to receive it, then that should be respected if they have the capacity to make such a decision. Consent is imperative to engagement and facilitating the student's sense of autonomy, independence, and freedom
- Schools need to provide clarity around why they want to deploy a TA to work with a student and the benefits need to be understood by the student as this is likely to promote their engagement with the support
- Focus must be placed on building the relationship between the TA and student as it is clear how important relationships are in promoting the success of support and also engagement with the process. Schools must ensure that the relationships are boundaried to prevent the risk of the student being emotionally dependent on the TA

- The TA working with the student needs to ensure that the work they do is communicating the message that they are focusing on both the welfare as well as the learning of the student, as there is value in knowing that the professional is also invested in the student as an individual beyond learning

### ***5.9.2 Local authority and government considerations***

- Government should consider the development of national guidance around the deployment of TAs to support schools in delivering TA support in an evidence-based way. It would be helpful for this guidance to also contain requirements for TA support, including deploying TAs through a person-centred approach
- Local authorities should consider developing systems to gather data on the whole borough to monitor the effectiveness of TA support for learning, wellbeing, and independence, which may then allow for areas of concern, for example, schools experiencing challenges with ineffective deployment, to be identified and thus targeted for support. This would then allow for relevant training to be provided

### ***5.9.3 Considerations for educational psychology***

- Educational psychologists are well placed to work closely with schools to promote person-centred approaches in SEND support and must stress the importance and value of such approaches whilst ensuring schools have access

to appropriate pupil-voice resources and exposure to appropriate, evidence-based methods to promote student voice, for example, person centred reviews

- Educational psychologists should ensure that they monitor the deployment of TAs and it would be helpful to have TA support as a standing agenda item for whole-school consultation meetings to facilitate consultation on this important area
- If appropriate, educational psychologists should work with TAs directly through training on how to provide effective TA support to CYP with SEND with a focus on independence. Educational psychologists should also work with teachers as the SEND CoP (DfE, 2014) states they are accountable for the progress and development of all pupils, even when they receive support from TAs
- Building on the previous point, educational psychologists could also work with teachers to support them in working with TAs to deploy them more effectively
- Educational psychologists should consult with schools to support them in performing an audit of their current TA support systems
- Educational psychologists must emphasise the importance of deploying TAs in a way that is proactive and focused on building independence rather than being used as a reactive strategy to support CYP
- Educational psychologists may consider offering supervision for TAs to ensure effectiveness. Such an intervention could further promote the use of person-centred approaches and focus on how TAs can develop the independence of the CYP with SEND that they work with

## 5.10 Summary and conclusion

This study explored the perspectives of KS4 students with SEND around the one-to-one TA support they received for learning and wellbeing, and independence in these areas, with a focus on what is working well and the areas for development. The findings suggest that TA support can be beneficial for the learning and wellbeing of students at this level of education. With learning, there are clear benefits for engagement, understanding, organisation and planning, flexibility in learning approaches, and task completion. There also appears to be an advantage of TA support in the sense of them acting as advocates for students. When the views of the pupils are considered and the support is individualised, there appears to be more successful student engagement with TA support. In terms of wellbeing benefits, TA support appears to have advantages in providing a close, positive relationship with a professional in school with whom they can seek psychological support from by various means: sharing feelings, emotional safety, trust, perspective, emotional containment, and reassurance. There is a clear need for a strong relationship between the TA and student as this appears to facilitate a more successful working relationship. However, there are challenges which were highlighted in the findings including social stigma, peer separation linked to social exclusion, over-support from TAs for learning, and difficulties with limited access to TA support and the TA not being sufficiently prepared (e.g., possibly lacking knowledge of the lesson topic which may prevent them giving learning support) .



Several challenges were identified from the current study around TA support for independence which require consideration by professionals, and the challenges appear to outweigh the current benefits as reported by the participants in this study. The main examples of good practice for learning independence involved fading support and ensuring the student understood the purpose of TA support. The challenges involve over-support from TAs, frequent close proximity of the TA to the student, and a possible compressed sense of freedom and independence when working with TAs. In terms of wellbeing independence, there was a minor theme of emotional dependence on the TA which may be linked to trust. However, it appears that TAs can support confidence which then seemingly increased wellbeing independence.

Overall, to conclude, it could be said that there is a myriad of benefits for learning and wellbeing related to TA support for KS4 pupils with SEND. However, there are various challenges associated with building independence, and from the findings, the role of the TA in supporting student independence is a cause for concern. It is essential that professionals deploy TA support through a person-centred approach to ensure that support is individualised and motivating to the student, whilst taking care to promote the autonomy of the individual being supported. TA support needs to be co-constructed with students and it is imperative that they work towards goals which are meaningful for them. They must also understand the purpose of the support and consent to the intervention.

The current study contributes a unique insight into how pupils experience TA support for learning and wellbeing, including what is working well and what needs to change. By collecting pupil voice, the study was able to highlight new findings around preparedness of TAs regarding lesson content and the value of person-centred approaches from the views of the students receiving the support. There are also unique findings around the importance of trust in working well together and the risk of emotional dependency due to intense attachment to the TA. For example, the finding around the value in the TA and student working towards collaborative goals in TA support was not reported in the literature reviewed for the study despite the importance of person-centred approaches being well established in literature. Therefore, without exploring pupil views, these novel findings would not have been highlighted. The findings present an avenue through which one-to-one TA support can be developed to then promote the outcomes of KS4 students with SEND.

# Appendix

## Appendix A

### Approach to Literature Search

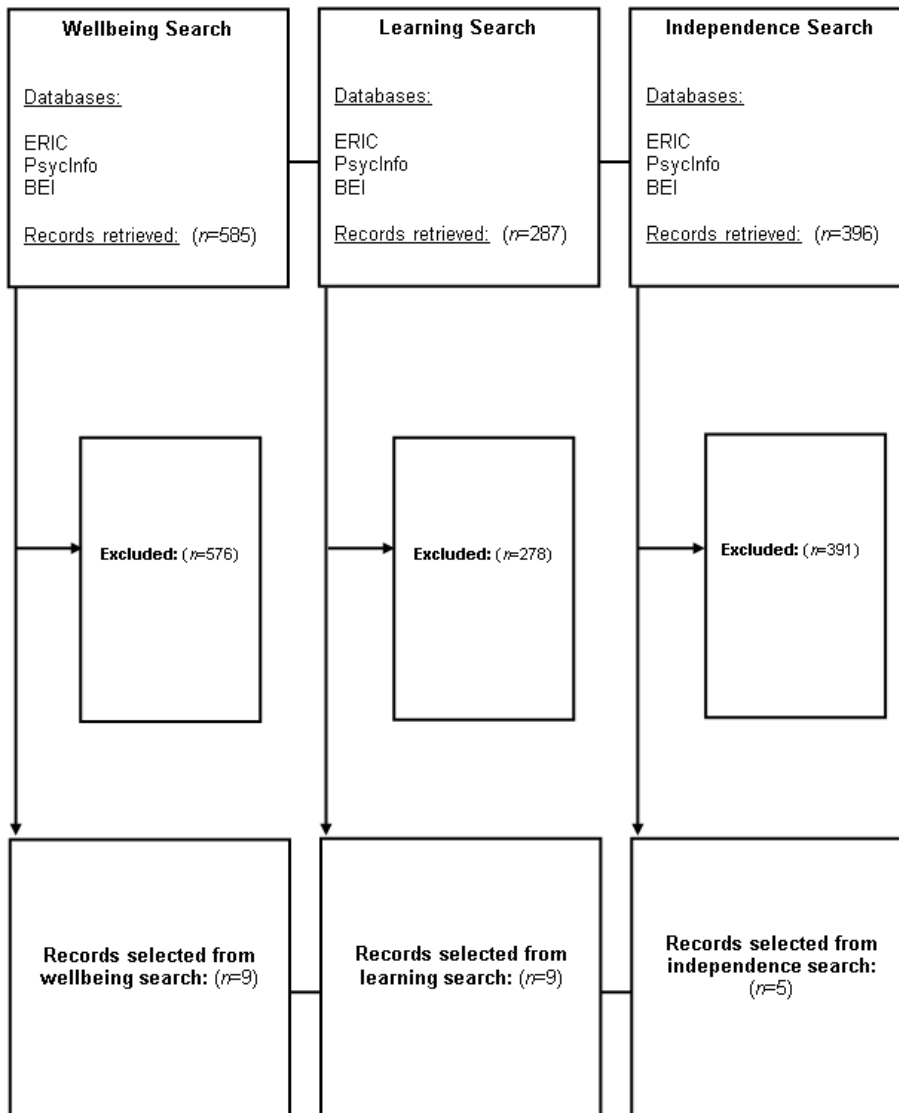
In order to ensure all literature relevant to the current topic was identified, a systematic approach was undertaken to search for peer reviewed research articles and grey literature. For each of the three key study concepts (wellbeing, learning, and independence), separate searches were carried out for each concept on three literature databases (ERIC - Education Resource Information Centre, PsycInfo, and BEI – British Education Index). A snowballing approach to identifying literature was also implemented to identify further or missed literature, and a hand search resulted in a number of articles for inclusion in the study ( $n=12$ ). To ensure new research was identified, the researcher signed up to relevant journal article mailing lists. The references of identified articles were considered as well as using Google and Google Scholar.

The table below summarises the searches carried out. Articles were selected based on relevance to the study which was done by reading the abstract to start, and if more information was needed, then reading the research report. In terms of exclusions, reasons for this included irrelevant topic, study within a county with a vastly different education system, incorrect age range, incorrect sample, and repetition. Where possible, databases were limited to provide peer-reviewed journal articles, in English language, since 2000, and in countries with westernised, or similar, education systems. Each search used a systematic search term which included variations in all key search

terms to ensure the search captured as many terms as possible to make the search as specific as possible. The systematic search is represented visually in Figure 9 below.

**Figure 9**

*Diagram of Systematic Search*



The systematic search term was as follows below and the terms required for each key concept were then added, and these terms can be found in the table below:

("Pupil Voice" OR "Pupil View\*" OR "Pupil Perspectiv\*" OR "Student Voice" OR "Student Perspectiv\*" OR "Student View\*" OR "Child\* Voice" OR "Child\* View\*" OR "Child\* Perspectiv\*" OR "Child\* and Adolec\* View\*") AND (Support OR Assistance OR Help) AND ("Teaching Assistant\*" OR "Learning Support Assistant\*" OR "Teacher Assistant\*" OR "Classroom Assistant\*" OR Paraprofessional\* OR Paraeducator\* OR "Support Staff" OR "Teacher Aid\*" OR Co-educator\* OR Auxiliary OR "Learning Mentor\*") AND ("Special Educational Need\*" OR Disabilit\* OR SEND OR SEN OR "Learning Difficult\*" OR "Special Need\*" OR "Special Education" OR "Learning Disabilit\*")

**Table 2***Approach to Systematic Search for Learning*

<b>Databases</b>	<b>Terms</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Limits Applied</b>	<b>Number Identified</b>	<b>Number Relevant</b>
ERIC	Learning OR Studying OR Education OR Schooling	19.02.2023	Since 2004 (no option for since 2000); English language; Peer reviewed	167	1
PsycInfo		02.03.2023	Since 2000; English language; Peer reviewed	113	4
BEI		06.03.2023	Since 2004; English language; Peer reviewed	7	5

**Table 3***Approach to Systematic Search for Wellbeing*

<b>Databases</b>	<b>Terms</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Limits Applied</b>	<b>Number Identified</b>	<b>Number Relevant</b>
<b>ERIC</b>	Wellbeing OR Mental Health	19.02.2023	Since 2004 (no option for since 2000); English language; Peer reviewed	274	4
<b>PsycInfo</b>		02.03.2023	Since 2000; English language; Peer reviewed	61	3
<b>BEI</b>		06.03.2023	Since 2004; English language; Peer reviewed	250	2

**Table 4***Approach to Systematic Search for Independence*

<b>Databases</b>	<b>Terms</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Limits Applied</b>	<b>Number Identified</b>	<b>Number Relevant</b>
<b>ERIC</b>	Independence OR Independent	19.02.2023	Since 2004 (no option for since 2000); English language; Peer reviewed	242	1
<b>PsycInfo</b>		06.03.2023	Since 2000; English language; Peer reviewed	112	4
<b>BEI</b>		06.03.2023	Since 2004; English language; Peer reviewed	42	0



## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Schedule**

#### **General Prompts**

- Can you tell me more about that?
- How come?
- How so?
- Why do you think that is?
- Is that a good/bad thing?

#### **General Questions**

How much time/how often? If they struggle, give options of never/sometimes/often.

Why do you spend time with a teaching assistant?

### **Learning**

#### **Area Prompts**

##### **Engagement**

- Attention
- Learning understanding

- Learning completion
- Proximity
- Over support

## **Learning Questions**

In school, what do you do well/find easy? Think about the learning side of things in particular

- What is harder for you?
- Overall, how well do you think you're doing at school with the learning side of things?

Can you give me some examples of things you've learnt in school recently?

- What did you learn on your own?
- What did you learn with the help of a TA?

More generally/on the whole, tell me about the times when you work with a TA to help with your learning

- Which subjects?
- What do they help with?

Do you feel working with the teaching assistant helps you with your learning?

- In what ways? How?

If you did not have a TA to support you with learning, what would that be like?

- How would you get on?
- What would the good things be?
- What would the bad things be?

Overall, what are the best parts about having support for your learning from a TA?

To bring it all together, what are the trickiest parts about having support for your learning from a TA?

- If you had a magic wand which gave you two wishes to make the support better, what would you choose and why?

If you were asked to write some advice for TAs on how to support students in the best way with their learning, what top three tips would you give?

### **Learning Independence Questions**

What's it like when you do work/learn on your own in school?

- What do you like?
- What do you dislike?

Do you manage better with or without the TA?

- Why do you think that is?
- How does a TA help / hinder you?

Can you give me an example of when you have managed better with a TA? Why do you think you managed better?

How independent would you say you are in your learning on a scale of 1-10 (1=not independent at all, 5=somewhat independent, 10=very independent)?

Do you think the TA helps you to be independent with your learning?

- What do they do to help you be independent in your learning?
- Could they do more to help you be more independent with your learning?

If you were to give advice to the TA for how to help you become more independent in learning, what would you say?

## **Wellbeing**

### **Wellbeing Area Prompts**

- Social stigma
- Social inclusion

- Confidence
- Relationships

## **Wellbeing Questions**

Do you know what wellbeing means?

- If yes, please describe it to me
- Can you give an example of what positive wellbeing might be?
- What might be an example of having a poor wellbeing?

Do you get help for your wellbeing in school?

- Can you tell me more about that?

How do you feel the TA supports with your wellbeing?

- If so, how?
- If struggling, give prompts such as TAs doing regulation activities with students, breathing exercises, doing group interventions with them, talking to them about their feelings, helping them to name their feelings, listening to them, acknowledging, anxiety around learning, helping you to form relationships with pupils/teachers, validating, providing a safe space, calming them down when upset/angry/anxious, helping you feel more confident, giving you a pep talk/telling you that you can do it

### **Alternative to above**

How do you find the support that the TA gives you for your wellbeing?

- What is it like for you?
- Is it more helpful or unhelpful?
- On a scale of 1-10, how helpful would you say the support you get from your TA for wellbeing is? 1=very unhelpful, 5=somewhat helpful, 10=very helpful

Has having a TA had a positive or negative impact on your wellbeing?

- Can you give me examples? Some areas that have been impacted might be your confidence and anxiety levels
- Why do you think this is?

If you were to give advice to your TA to give you better help with your wellbeing, what would you say?

- If they say nervous, say if you could communicate this anonymously, or if another person said it to them, what would you say?
- What could be better?
- What did you not like? How could this be better?

## Wellbeing Independence Questions

On a scale of 1-10, how independent would you say you are in looking after your wellbeing? 1=not independent at all, 5=a little independent, 10=very independent?

- Use this to probe, for example, if a 5, what could the TA do to help you be a 6?

Can you give me an example of when the TA has helped you to manage your wellbeing on your own?

- What have they done to help you cope better independently before?

How would you say the support you receive from a TA helps you to become more independent in looking after your wellbeing/mental health?

- How do you think they do this?
- What activities do they do to help you become more independent here? Give prompts if struggling, such as having a step-by-step plan to manage anxiety, giving strategies to practice on your own, etc

What is it about the support that helps you to be more independent? / Why do you think the support doesn't help you to be more independent?

If you were to give advice on how TAs could help you to manage your wellbeing on your own more, what would you tell them?

## **Appendix C**

### **Ethical Approval**

#### Departmental Use

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, the supervisor must refer the application to the Research Development Administrator via email so that it can be submitted to the IOE Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A departmental research ethics coordinator or representative can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the REC. If unsure please refer to the guidelines explaining when to refer the ethics application to the IOE Research Ethics Committee, posted on the committee's website.

Student name: Jonathan Porrino

Student department: Psychology and Human Development

Course: Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology (DEdPsy)

Project Title: A thematic analysis of the perspectives of Key Stage 4 pupils with special educational needs who receive individual support from teaching assistants in mainstream secondary schools: What is working well and what are the areas for development?


#### **Reviewer 1**



Supervisor/first reviewer name: Matt Somerville

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

No

Supervisor/first reviewer signature: 


Date: 17.05.22

## **Reviewer 2**

Second reviewer name: Paula Bosanquet

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research?

No

Second reviewer signature: 

Date: 18.05.22

## **Decision on behalf of reviewers**

**Approved**

## Appendix D

### Theme Information

#### Theme 1: TA support benefits learning

##### *Description*

How the participants perceive the TA supports their learning.

##### *Boundaries of theme*

The theme does not necessarily account specifically for independence in learning and how TAs support this.

##### *What is unique and specific about the theme?*

The focus on how the students are supported to learn and which strategies are implemented to effect.

##### *What does the theme contribute to the overall analysis?*

Insights into the usefulness of TA learning support and what students value. The theme also contributes an understanding of what is important to the research participants which may have implications for the value added by TAs.

***Number of codes***

(*n*=73)

**Table 2***Subthemes for Theme 1*

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example Code</b>	<b>Example Extracts</b>	<b>Number of Codes</b>
Subtheme A: TAs support student understanding of learning	How TAs support the student to understand the work they do	Understanding work	So if I don't understand something they tell me what to do and like with instructions mainly and like yeah	30
Subtheme B: TAs support learning engagement	How TAs support students to be involved in learning, involving attention, motivation, and encouragement	Motivation when tired	And that's when I become really silly and I can't concentrate on what I'm doing and she would be like, well we've gotta do this.	21
Subtheme C: TAs support task completion	How TAs support students to finish learning tasks	Increased amount of work completion with TA	Definitely, definitely my English book. The amount of work in it is definitely increased with one [a TA].	10

<p>Subtheme D: Improving TA learning support</p>	<p>These opportunities were explicitly stated in the data by the participants</p>	<p>Knowledge of subject prior to lesson</p>	<p>Um, and for my second I would probably, um, I just don't know for the second one, um, it's probably, uh, to have the teacher assistants, um, knowing what the lessons can be about before, um, it actually starts ah, um, instead of them, um, like learning with you, they, they can already, um, pretty much like remember from uh, when they're in school and all that. Um, so then they can help you based off of um, just in like general knowledge and um, like how they remember it.</p>	<p>8</p>
<p>Subtheme E: TAs encourage the development of organizational and planning skills</p>	<p>The benefits of TAs in helping students to manage learning demands</p>	<p>Reminders</p>	<p>Yeah, just a bit planning and organization.  It's definitely been a help. Like now I don't have to get like, oh I haven't done my homework. Mainly, but I</p>	<p>4</p>

just do it in class. But it  
like, if there's anything that  
I haven't quite often it's  
reminded me like, oh yeah,  
I need to do that.

<b>Peers support learning</b>	Students around the individual, particularly friends, help the student learn as well as TAs	Learning support from friends	Yeah because they think my friends don't help me learn but they actually do. They help me with my learning and I help them	3
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## **Theme 2: Dependency on TA support**

### ***Description***

This reflects the idea that students feel unable to cope without TA support. This is mainly a dependency on TA learning support but there was also a minor theme of emotional dependency on the TA

### ***Boundaries of theme***

Some of the codes in this theme rely on the researcher taking an analytical approach to deducing what may help students to be independent

### ***What is unique and specific about the theme?***

The theme details the nuances of independence which is arguably a complex concept, and achieving a detailed reflection of independence in the context of the current study may be difficult if it were conveyed within a sub-theme due to the intricate nature of the concept.

***What does the theme contribute to the overall analysis?***

The theme arguably provides a comprehensive account of how the participants perceive their own independence and which factors both facilitate and impede this.

***Number of codes***

(*n*=72)



**Table 3***Subthemes for Theme 2*

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example Code</b>	<b>Example Extracts</b>	<b>Number of Codes</b>
Subtheme A: Ideas to improve learning independence	This refers to aspects of TA support which were identified as challenging that could then be avoided to potentially increase independence. The sub-theme also contains ideas from participants around how TAs can increase independence	Time to figure the work out alone	So if, but they do give you the times where they let you, where they have you figure out, figure out what to be, what to be, what to do, um, on your own. So there are those times where, um, you figure out what to do by yourself which actually is just you learning and not just someone or not and not having someone who knows what to do do it for you.	26
Subtheme B: Student dependency on	The feeling of not being able to manage learning	TAs reduce independence	Well promoting independence, it's not really how a TA works, because if	25

TA learning support	without the support of a TA		they do too much, then the learner becomes dependent on the TA
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Subtheme C: Possible increased sense of freedom and independence without TAs	The idea that without TA support, students may feel increased sense of independence and freedom.  Students were asked to consider how it would feel to have no TA support	Increased freedom and independence	Well, I could, I'd get like more freedom in a way but at the same time I could get less work done, a bit less work done, sometimes without them, I do get in a bit of trouble, for like, behaviour wise and learning wise, and I don't understand things	14
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Subtheme D: Emotional dependence on TA	The feeling of struggling to cope emotionally without the TA and possibly being intensely attached	Intense attachment to TA	She was like the only TA I'd kind of, I almost go like kind of attached her. I'd got on very well with her	7
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### **Theme 3: Quality of TA and student relationship is important for success**

#### ***Description***

The connection between the student and the TAS supporting them, characterised by closeness, trust, and emotional safety. It is important to have a good relationship to work well together.

#### ***Boundaries of theme***

The perception of what constitutes a positive relationship between a TA and a student is arguably highly subjective and difficult to generalise to the context of deploying TAs to work effectively with students.

#### ***What is unique and specific about the theme?***

How students conceptualise a healthy relationship and boundaries with a professional

What does the theme contribute to the overall analysis? The importance of connection to facilitate learning and mental health in a school context

#### ***Number of codes***

(*n*=53)

**Table 4***Subthemes for Theme 3*

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example Code</b>	<b>Example Extracts</b>	<b>Number of Codes</b>
Subtheme A: Closeness with TA promotes learning and wellbeing	The health of the relationship between the TA and student and the importance of this in working well together	Close relationship	Well we kind of have like jokes because he thinks he's really good at basketball when in reality he's not. So he has this massive ego about everything. I mean the only thing that I'll give him is he's good at rugby cuz he used to play for England. Yeah. So he is just a chill guy and we joke a lot and he's actually pretty understanding of me. Like. It's quite difficult to understand me cuz I'm a complex person but he gets me.	21

Subtheme B: Trusting the TA is important for working together	The importance of being able to rely on the TA and the emotional impact of a caring relationship between the TA and student	Lack of trust in TA relationship	Not really. I got involved with them but I didn't trust them that much.	10
Subtheme C: Approach to engaging the student is important	The qualities and attitude the TA takes to engaging students is important to work well together	TA attitude	I mean I've got a different LSA this year and he's, he's a better LSA. He's much more chill.	12
Subtheme D: Close relationships foster psychological safety	The safety that is developed in a healthy connection and the importance of this in working together well	Safe space with TA	I think it's cuz kind of like have a safe space cuz it used to be I'm just here, I'm isolated in a way, but now there's like a little safe space [with the TA].	5
Subtheme E: Focus on learning and wellbeing	Knowing that the TA holds the student is mind and cares more about them as a person rather than	TA looking after the pupil	I mean, I'd probably just say something like, are you having a laugh? Like why? Because I'd, I'd want to know the reason. I mean I'd still see him in school and everything, but he wouldn't	5

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just the learning is  
important

just be like looking after me  
or whatever.

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## **Theme 4: TA support benefits wellbeing**

### ***Description***

This is the view that TAs supported the wellbeing of the students. Wellbeing is the personal experience of affect and psychological functioning, consisting of your emotional state and one's general outlook on life, such as one's purpose, direction, satisfaction, emotional health, resilience, autonomy, relationships, and self-acceptance.

### ***Boundaries of theme***

Does not cross into how the whole school system impacts wellbeing, but rather, just TA support, and although the aim of the study was to explore TA support, there are many school factors impacting wellbeing.

### ***What is unique and specific about the theme?***

How the participants place importance on aspects of TA support in being helpful for their wellbeing

What does the theme contribute to the overall analysis? The intricate nature of wellbeing support and how TAs may support wellbeing through indirect and unconscious approaches.

***Number of codes:***

(*n*=39)



**Table 5***Subthemes for Theme 4*

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example Code</b>	<b>Example Extracts</b>	<b>Number of Codes</b>
Subtheme A: Sharing feelings	The wellbeing benefits of opening up about feelings to the TA	Reassura nce	But then also how she's [TA] just kind of someone to talk to as well which you find quite reassuring	23
Subtheme B: Increased confidence	The ability of TA support to develop the student's capacity and ability to believe in their own skills and capabilities	Confidenc e to ask for help	Yeah, um, helps me help me build up the confidence to talk and I'll say and ask an adult when I need help	9
Subtheme C: TAs advocating for the student	The benefit of the TA knowing the student well and then being able to increase the understanding that others have	Advocatin g for student	Yeah. Like when I'm in class I sometimes get really anxious like, uh, all my teachers that I've got at the moment, they've been told not to pick on me, like to ask me questions cuz I freeze up in front of everyone. I can't answer it. Even if it's like the easiest thing I'll	7

of the student's  
needs

freeze up out of nowhere and I  
can't answer it. So my, I came in  
to school really anxious the first  
day and we told my, is it Ms.  
Head? Ms. Roper our head of  
year and she didn't really do a lot  
about it and I had to go talk to my  
teaching assistant and she  
emailed all my teachers for me.  
So she's done quite a lot for me.  
Like with all the blue paper, my  
head of view was supposed to do  
that and she didn't. And of course  
she emailed out again for me. So  
she did a lot for me when the  
other teachers actually weren't.

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## **Theme 5: Individualised and person-centred TA support**

### ***Description***

This theme refers to the idea of TA support being personalised to fit the needs of the student and account for their views so that the TA and student can work collaboratively to achieve.

### ***Boundaries of theme***

Although the idea of individualised support is generalisable, the theme does not offer specific strategies/ideas for how to implement this, but rather, offers suggestions based on individual experience of strategies that have worked or may work for that person. However, individuals are complex and need different support approaches, so the recommendation for an individualised approach could be deemed vague and impractical.

### ***What is unique and specific about the theme?***

There may be an idea that the participants felt their support was not necessarily tailored which raises important implications for how TAs are deployed

### ***What does the theme contribute to the overall analysis?***

The theme arguably provides the project with a focussed set of data on ways in which TA support can be deployed in a person-centred way, which is one of the aims of the project.

***Number of codes***

(*n*=34)

**Table 6***Subthemes for Theme 5*

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example Code</b>	<b>Example Extracts</b>	<b>Number of Codes</b>
Subtheme A: Students and TAs working as active partners	Students having a say in how their support is delivered	TA support as and when needed, not constantly	I could have a day where I've got no time in here [learning support assistant area] and go to lesson, but I could have another day that is a complete write off and I will be in there all day , it just depends	14
Subtheme B: Flexible and bespoke support	This refers to the TA giving support in a way that is malleable and responsive to the needs of the student	Help students learn in their own way	Well in essence let me do their work in my own way. If it's productive and shows everything the teachers wants, whether it be a spider diagram, a chart, a graph, or a paragraph, it's fine. If it's got all the	10

information required,  
then it's fine

Subtheme C:	The need for the	Understanding	...than the ones that are	10
Collaborative goals	TA and student to work collaboratively towards shared goals		just there, like they don't understand [the student doesn't understand why the TA is there]. They've just said, they're just like, oh I've always had a support assistant, I don't know what they're for. It's just like. Either they think they're there for the wrong reasons. Like oh I'm very hyperactive in class so that's why they just like to control me through the teacher doesn't have to deal with me.	

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## **Theme 6: TA support is linked to negative social impact**

### ***Description***

Receiving support from TAs can lead to negative social impacts through social exclusion through social stigma, physical proximity, and separation from peers.

### ***Boundaries of theme***

There are difficulties quantifying social stigma as the signs are often implicit.

### ***What is unique and specific about the theme?***

The factors which can combine to increase social exclusion.

### ***What does the theme contribute to the overall analysis?***

An understanding of how students perceive the social impact of having TA support at a stage of development where there may be an increase in self-consciousness.

### ***Number of codes***

(n=21)

**Table 7***Subthemes for Theme 6*

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example Code</b>	<b>Example Extracts</b>	<b>Number of Codes</b>
Subtheme A: Social exclusion	The negative perceptions that other students may have towards TA support and how this could impact the way they view the student receiving it.  Social stigma appears linked to proximity	Friends have negative perceptions about student because they get TA support	It would not make much of a difference really. As in like I could just get more independent, uh yeah, and my friends just think that I'm sort of a, a bit of a, they think that I'm a bit of a retard for getting support [from a TA]	12
Subtheme B: Social exclusion	How working with TAs can impact social connections in the classroom	Moved away from friends to have TA support	Yeah so say if there's a cover lesson and I sit with my friends and they aren't being sat in their usual position/seats, it just ends up being me moved to the front , and what that	9



would do to me is I just  
end up being annoyed

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