



## Socioemotional instruction in learning support staff across Italian primary schools: a call for using the 'multidimensional, scaffolding framework' in training programmes

Lorenzo Ciletti, Ed Baines & Matthew P. Somerville

**To cite this article:** Lorenzo Ciletti, Ed Baines & Matthew P. Somerville (27 Oct 2024): Socioemotional instruction in learning support staff across Italian primary schools: a call for using the 'multidimensional, scaffolding framework' in training programmes, European Journal of Special Needs Education, DOI: [10.1080/08856257.2024.2421107](https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2024.2421107)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2024.2421107>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 27 Oct 2024.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

# Socioemotional instruction in learning support staff across Italian primary schools: a call for using the ‘multidimensional, scaffolding framework’ in training programmes

Lorenzo Ciletti<sup>a,b</sup>, Ed Baines<sup>b</sup> and Matthew P. Somerville<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK; <sup>b</sup>Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK

## ABSTRACT

International research has illustrated that learning support staff (LSS) play a crucial role in the instruction of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND): they support the children’s classwork while teachers manage the whole-class instruction. However, fewer research studies have explored LSS’s role in the children’s socioemotional learning, although this support is highly important for pupils’ regulation of negative emotions, effective participation in whole-class conversations, and academic learning. The current research explores LSS socioemotional practices in a relatively unexamined country (Italy), providing LSS with a high level of training. Thirty-one primary-school-LSS members completed a questionnaire and interview. The LSS reported infrequently supporting the socioemotional learning of children with (and without) SEND despite their difficulties. Also, they appeared to overly control the children’s peer interactions and emotions, minimising their self-management. The participants associated their infrequent socioemotional instruction with their limited socioemotional training and preparedness, and insufficient persuasion by the national curriculum to promote socioemotional education. Findings are largely interpreted using a new ‘multidimensional, scaffolding framework’ linking LSS socioemotional practices and related children’s learning. Findings also suggest that the framework could usefully guide LSS training.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 June 2024  
Accepted 15 October 2024

## KEYWORDS

Learning support staff; support teachers; teaching assistants, children with special educational needs and/or disabilities; socioemotional instruction; scaffolding

## Background

### *Learning support staff internationally: the cases of the UK and USA*

Internationally, mainstream schools hire learning support staff (LSS) to support the education of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND; Webster and Boer 2023). Most countries, including the UK and USA, rely on LSS with limited, if any, teacher education. These staff members, known as teaching assistants, play a relevant role in the pastoral care of children with SEND, such as monitoring them during recess and

**CONTACT** Lorenzo Ciletti  [l.ciletti@soton.ac.uk](mailto:l.ciletti@soton.ac.uk)  Southampton Education School, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

assisting with hygiene. Crucially, they also have pedagogical responsibilities: they are generally expected to support the classwork of children with SEND on a one-to-one basis or in group settings. Meanwhile, teachers design classroom activities for children with and without SEND, and manage the whole-class conversation.

In the USA, research by Giangreco (2009) illustrated that the LSS's continuous one-to-one support to children with SEND could nonetheless create the conditions for exclusion from whole-class discussions. As a result, these children might receive limited instruction from trained practitioners – classroom teachers – and would compromise their peer interactions. Additionally, Giangreco (2009) suggested that when children with SEND are the only pupils working with LSS, it could make them stand out negatively in their peers' perceptions (e.g. as privileged children). This might further damage their ability to interact with peers, leading to social isolation and possibly emotional distress (e.g. loneliness).

In the largest existing study involving LSS, Blatchford, Russell, and Webster (2011) confirmed and extended these findings across the UK. Along with showing that the LSS's deployment might separate children with SEND from whole-class dynamics, their research illustrated that the LSS's typical pedagogical practice, such as providing task solutions to children while completing academic tasks, could compromise the pupils' thinking and learning. Blatchford, Russell, and Webster (2011) explained this 'ineffective' pedagogical practice as the unintended consequence of UK school policies: particularly, a lack of teacher training standards for LSS, which may negatively impact the LSS's training and pedagogical preparedness.

In short, existing research shows that LSS's one-to-one support for children with SEND may negatively affect their academic learning and social skills; it might also lead to the pupils' social isolation and emotional distress (Webster and Boer 2023). Nevertheless, little is known in the UK, USA, or internationally about LSS direct support for children's socio-emotional competencies in classroom contexts (Baines, Blatchford, and Kutnick 2017). More than their teaching role, LSS's promotion of interactions among children with and without SEND can enhance the children's social skills and peer relations. Similarly, LSS instruction on regulating negative emotions, such as anxiety, might impact academic performance: for instance, helping children cope with the stress of academic tests would enable them to effectively perform such tasks and learn from doing so (O'Conner et al. 2017). Hence, the current study explores the relatively unexamined important role of LSS in assisting children's socioemotional learning. LSS's extended opportunity for one-to-one interaction with a single child during classroom activities could offer an optimal platform to examine and deliver such practices.

### ***The unique conditions of employment and training for learning support staff in Italy***

Whilst the previous discussion is internationally relevant, it does not fully address the specific nuances of educating children with SEND in Italian mainstream schools (D'Alessio 2012). In Italy, two groups of professionals (alongside teachers) support the education of children with SEND. The first group includes professionals with limited teacher training, known as assistants for autonomy and communication (Di Michele 2020). These assistants are primarily responsible for providing one-to-one

pastoral care and communication support solely to children with severe SEND, both during and outside classroom activities. For instance, they facilitate peer interactions for children with hearing loss (e.g. via sign language), or support children with physical impairments with mealtimes. Despite some of their work, such as facilitating children's peer interactions, may have pedagogical and socioemotional implications, these 'Italian' assistants are not expected to have any specific teaching responsibilities. As such, this paper will not classify them as learning support staff (Webster and Boer 2023).

The second group of staff involved in the education of children with SEND in Italy is known as support teachers (Ciletti 2023). They play a much more significant and direct pedagogical role in the academic and socioemotional learning of all Italian children with SEND, including those with severe needs. Where possible, they also help bridge the gaps in pastoral care for children with (and without) severe needs when assistants for autonomy and communication are unavailable, a particularly common situation in Italian schools (Di Michele 2020). Hence, this research will target support teachers as a more suitable group of 'learning support staff' (LSS) in Italy. In this section, the detailed description of these Italian LSS and their unique conditions of employment and training will provide a rationale for exploring the Italian context.

Italian schools employ LSS based on the number of school children with SEND, and deploy them across classrooms that include these children (D'Alessio 2012). Additionally, LSS are invited to collaborate with teachers to educate whole classes: for instance, co-designing whole-class curricula, and possibly making learning adaptations for children with SEND through their individual educational plans (e.g. individualised literacy support). Also, LSS and teachers share the whole-class instruction. Hence, unlike LSS in the UK or USA, who are responsible for only the education of children with SEND, Italian LSS effectively take on co-teaching roles.

Regardless, research pertaining to Italy illustrates that LSS typically work with children with SEND, while teachers manage the whole-class instruction (Gianferrari 2010). Research by Ciletti (2023) largely explained these unexpected findings as the consequence of LSS's employment and deployment in relation to schoolchildren with SEND. These conditions seemingly create a *de facto* association of LSS with the instruction of children with SEND, echoing their teaching practices.

Furthermore, Italian legislation instructs LSS to receive the highest training for LSS internationally (D'Alessio 2012). Notably, secondary-school LSS are expected to obtain a master's degree in special education (MSE) instead of the teachers' compulsory initial qualifications concerning the subject they teach (e.g. biology). Conversely, primary-school LSS's job requirements include the MSE and the general teaching qualifications for primary-school teachers (e.g. a master's in primary education). Furthermore, primary- and secondary-school LSS (and teachers) receive contracts paying for up to five days of in-service training every school year.

Despite this unique training opportunity for LSS in Italy, limited research has explored how this affects their practices, particularly socioemotional instruction (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018). Much of this research conducted in Italy has indeed focused on LSS deployment. Hence, the current research examines this relatively unexplored yet relevant socioemotional practice of LSS in children's learning. Italian primary-school LSS were selected as the unit of analysis as they commonly receive exceptional training (D'Alessio 2012).

This, combined with LSS's extended one-to-one interaction with children with SEND, could provide an excellent context for exploring effective socioemotional pedagogies.

Furthermore, the research explores factors influencing LSS's socioemotional practices in Italian primary schools (e.g. training). This enables the authors to identify potential barriers to and enhancers of LSS's socioemotional practices. Hence, this analysis raises significant implications for policymakers and school heads in Italy (and elsewhere).

### **Theoretical underpinnings: a 'new' multidimensional, scaffolding framework**

Another unique aspect of this study is that sociocultural literature is used to construct a nuanced theoretical framework to analyse the effect of LSS socioemotional instruction on children's learning. This section describes such sociocultural underpinnings and the paper's theoretical innovation.

Influential sociocultural theorists acknowledge that socioemotional processes are just as crucial as cognitive ones for learning (O'Conner et al. 2017). A fundamental aspect of learning is the interaction between the learner and their sociocultural community, including teachers and peers. As a result, learners encounter sociocultural information, such as academic logic and principles of effective interpersonal communication (e.g. clarity), which they may subsequently learn. During the learning process, learners may also experience emotional distress, such as anxiety when facing challenging academic tasks. If these negative emotions are not competently regulated through relaxation practices, or transformed into positive emotions like motivation, they can obstruct the individual's thinking and engagement with academic or social life tasks (e.g. public speaking). Ultimately, the individual learns by reflecting upon sociocultural principles, such as those informing how to effectively complete academic tasks (e.g. algebraical logic), thereby making them their own.

Given this multidimensional learning process, sociocultural theorists suggest that instruction should be designed according to the children's socioemotional and cognitive needs (Leeuwen and Janssen 2019). For instance, teachers should spend time interacting with or promoting social skills learning for children with communication and interaction difficulties (e.g. children with autism). When dealing with children's significant emotional difficulties, instructors should rather encourage positive emotions and regulate negative ones. Finally, pedagogical support should be provided when children experience difficulties completing academic tasks or have learning difficulties. This way, instructors effectively address children's primary area/s of need within their multidimensional learning process, thereby enhancing their developmental potential.

Another influential conceptualisation in sociocultural education research is the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD; Vygotsky 1978). Sociocultural theorists particularly argue that children learn best when addressing tasks in the ZPD: the distance between what children may achieve independently and what they can accomplish with the help of more capable others. Such tasks are contingent on children's current capabilities, allowing them to participate in their resolutions and accomplish new learning.

Simultaneously, sociocultural theorists invite instructors to design complex instructional assistance while children are addressing tasks (Van De Pol, Volman, and Beishuizen 2011). This interactive support, known as 'scaffolding', should be built upon the children's

competencies over time while completing tasks. This way, instructors facilitate children's engagement with tasks, their completion, and learning.

Based on these scaffolding theories and their extensive research on classroom talk in the UK, Bosanquet, Radford, and Webster (2016) recently developed a framework to help learning support staff (LSS) structure effective practices to support the learning of academic concepts in individual children. The core principle of their 'scaffolding framework' is that LSS must provide the least support to children while completing tasks. Thus, LSS would transfer most of the cognitive responsibility for task completion to children, maximising their cognition and learning.

This scaffolding principle informs multiple LSS pedagogical practices (Bosanquet, Radford, and Webster 2016). For example, when children can deal with tasks by themselves, the role of LSS is to observe children correctly completing their work (self-scaffolding). However, LSS can offer additional support if children have trouble addressing their tasks, for instance, by repeating the tasks' content (prompting), providing information on the tasks' solution (clueing), and modelling tasks' solutions using conceptually equivalent tasks. This way, LSS can promote children's independent completion of tasks. As a last resource, LSS are advised to supply tasks' solutions or correct children's mistakes. However, correcting and giving children answers are not helpful for learning.

Despite LSS frequently supporting children with significant socioemotional needs (e.g. those with autism), few research studies have explored LSS socioemotional strategies, including (Bosanquet, Radford, and Webster 2016; Webster and Boer 2023). Even less research has applied a theoretical framework to explore the impact of these strategies on children's socioemotional learning. In the following paragraphs, we describe socioemotional practices in teachers and LSS literature and relate to a key scaffolding principle: maximising the learner's independence. We also introduce a new, multidimensional, scaffolding framework to examine the impact of LSS socioemotional practices on children's socioemotional learning in this research.

International research in teachers and LSS practices commonly conceptualise socioemotional support in terms of directly instructing children on strategies concerning how to communicate effectively with peers and teachers or regulate pupils' negative emotions (e.g. self-talk; Leeuwen and Janssen 2019). These 'interventions' frequently involve socioemotional tasks, such as the 'correct' meaning to give to facial expressions. Similar to the case of academic tasks, instructors are advised to transfer the highest responsibility for completing socioemotional tasks in children to maximise their learning. Hence, Bosanquet, Radford, and Webster's (2016) framework provides valid examples of LSS effective scaffolding practices in the context of socioemotional interventions as well.

Whilst these interventions are commonly conducted away from the classroom (e.g. SEND units), there is reason to believe they can be conducted within classroom contexts (Leeuwen and Janssen 2019). This seems particularly viable in Italy, where children's education outside mainstream classrooms or in special classrooms/schools is banned (Borgonovi and Ciletti 2018). Furthermore, Italian LSS have the requisite teaching credentials and preparedness to adequately design socioemotional interventions. Hence, the research context provides the opportunity to examine effective, socioemotional interventions within the classroom context.

Another example of socioemotional practice in teachers and LSS is supporting children in a) ongoing group interactions or b) in response to children's emotional needs. In the

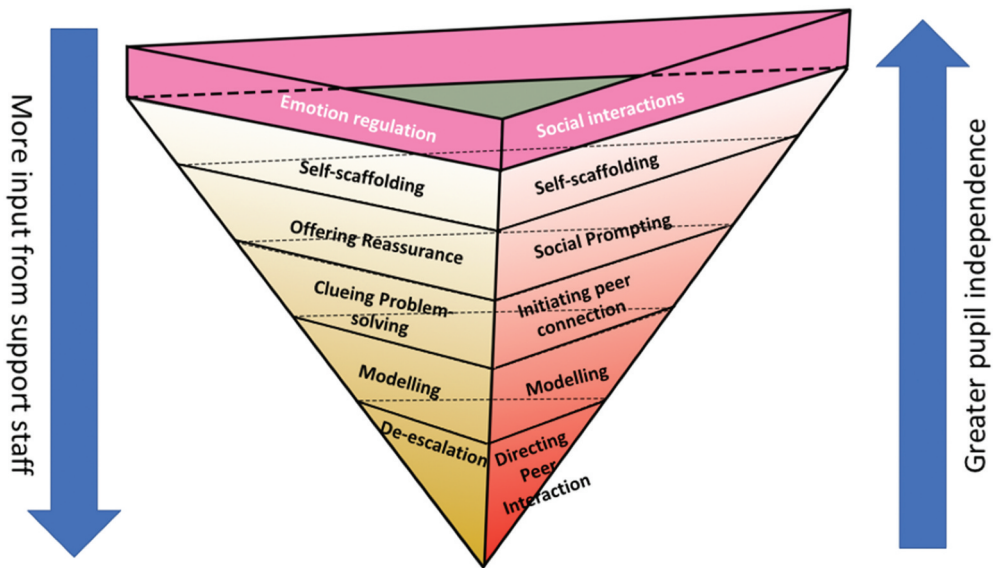
field of 'social support' for children's peer talk, Highton (2017) explored the classroom practices of a small group of LSS in the UK. He found that LSS first inspect the types and content of interactions among children. Next, according to the group talk pattern and the children's social needs, LSS variably support the students' speaking. For example, LSS monitor group interactions when children seem capable of independently managing their interactions. This enables the pupils to maximise their independent regulation of peer interactions and social skill learning potential (i.e. self-scaffolding). Alternatively, LSS 'direct' the interactions of group members when a single child may be excluded from talking and learning, facilitating inclusive discussion and explanations (Baines, Blatchford, and Kutnick 2017). This high level of support, however, may compromise the children's independence in peer interaction, thereby minimising their learning potential.

In addition to these low- and high-social-support practices, Salisbury (2017) identified other potential LSS strategies: a) 'social' prompting children to talk in a group setting (e.g. 'Would you like to say something?'), b) initiating a peer connection between the supported child and the rest of the group (e.g. 'Why you and your friend do not work together?'), or c) 'modelling' strategies of group interactions (Leeuwen and Janssen 2019). These strategies enable pupils to participate in group conversations as independently as possible and learn from doing so.

In the context of ongoing emotional support, research involving teachers has invited educators to elicit children's emotional states and potential precipitating elements (e.g. test anxiety; O'Conner et al. 2017). Next, when children cannot self-regulate their emotions independently (i.e. self-scaffolding), educators could provide reassurance to children – for instance, by promoting relaxation practices or breathing exercises for students with a heightened level of excitement or praising students with test anxiety for their prior successes. If needed, educators could progressively increase their emotional support by a) cluing principled, problem-solving solutions to address the precipitating cause of the children's emotional turbulence – for instance, helping children with test anxiety calm down by rationally assessing their skills related to the tasks at hand – or b) modelling emotion regulation strategies to address the negative emotions (e.g. self-talk). This way, educators might promote emotion regulation in children and their emotional learning. If these strategies are not enough, de-escalation strategies should be applied, such as: redirecting thinking on other matters or, when the emotional outburst could precipitate in children hurting themselves or their peers, physical restriction. However, this high level of support produces limited, if any, independent emotion regulation and learning in children.

Figure 1 gathers this interdisciplinary literature in a new version of the scaffolding framework. Whilst the original framework in Bosanquet, Radford, and Webster (2016) is a valid tool in the context of LSS supporting children addressing academic or socio-emotional tasks, this multidimensional, scaffolding framework explores various levels of support that LSS could provide when their supported children face difficulties in regulating socioemotional processes (e.g. peer interactions). LSS support increases as you move down each layer, whereas children's independence decreases. The core principle of the framework is for LSS to provide the least amount of support first and, if need be, gradually raise the level of support.

With these theories in mind, the authors explored the socioemotional practice of a small sample of primary-school LSS in Italy. The identified LSS practice was analysed according to the extent to which the LSS designed instruction



**Figure 1.** The multidimensional scaffolding framework.

contingently to children's areas of need, particularly socioemotional. Also, the multidimensional framework was combined with that of Bosanquet, Radford, and Webster (2016) to analyse the LSS strategies: insofar as these promote children's highest responsibility for their socioemotional and academic activities or socioemotional processes (e.g. peer interactions). Effective socioemotional practices were considered those that met children's socioemotional needs, and scaffolded their socioemotional learning.

## Method

This research explored LSS's socioemotional practices and the factors that shaped them (such as training) across Italian primary schools. The following overarching questions and sub-questions informed the analysis:

- (1) How do primary-school LSS promote children's socioemotional learning during classroom activities?
  - (a) How frequently do LSS provide socioemotional support?
  - (b) How do LSS design their socioemotional instruction?
- (2) What factors could be associated with LSS's socioemotional practice?

Data were drawn from a larger project exploring LSS deployment and practice. The current study relied on remote interviews and questionnaires with 31 LSS members. The tools effectively dealt with the COVID-19 social distancing restrictions that this study encountered (e.g. limitations on school visits). These nonetheless allowed regular schooling to continue. Ethical approval was granted to the research via the University College London's ethics process.



**Table 1.** Participants' classroom characteristics.

Classroom characteristics	Frequencies	%
<b>Year group taught*</b>		
Year 2	5	16%
Year 3	10	32%
Year 4	5	16%
Year 5	4	13%
Year 6	7	23%
<b>Area/s of need of children with SEND taught</b>		
<i>Single area of need</i>		
Child with cognition and learning difficulties (C&L)	18	58%
Child with communication and interaction difficulties (C&I)	6	19%
Child with communication and interaction difficulties (C&I)	4	13%
Child with social, emotional, and mental health difficulties (SEMH)	3	10%
Child with physical and/or sensory needs (P&SN)	5	16%
<i>Multiple areas of need</i>		
Child with C&L and SEMH	13	42%
Child with C&L and P&SN	5	16%
Child with C&L and P&SN	3	10%
Child with C&I and P&SN	2	6%
Child with SEMH and P&SN	1	3%
Child with C&I and C&L and P&SN	2	6%

Data were gathered through the LSS's questionnaire. \*UK equivalent age group.

### Sampling and participants

The thirty-one primary-school LSS members were purposefully recruited as having high-level training: they all had a master's in special education (MSE) and general teacher's teaching qualifications (e.g. a master's in primary education). As such, they effectively represented the general training of primary-school LSS in Italy (Ciletti 2023). Their high level of training was expected to echo effective and nuanced socioemotional strategies.

Whilst the sample size (31 LSS) was set at the onset of the research, it was considered flexible and could be extended if data saturation was not reached: there was evidence that the data, particularly interviews, would not become redundant in addressing the research questions (Low 2019). At the end of the 'fieldwork', data saturation was reached long before the 31st unit: no relevant new themes (or codes) were added after the 15th interview.

The 31 female participants taught across classrooms of all ages, with each classroom including one child with SEND. Table 1 provides further details regarding the year groups, and the areas of need of the children with SEND.

### Data collection

The 31 LSS members were initially asked to complete a questionnaire, which was digitally shared and filled out. The questionnaire gathered a wide range of information, such as LSS's demographics and the predominant area(s) of need experienced by the classroom children with SEND. Also, the questionnaire included three time-log spreadsheets, dividing three hours of lessons across three different school days into four intervals of 20 minutes. For each interval, participants were invited to indicate the child or group of children they had worked predominantly with over the last three days of schooling before the questionnaire completion, along with the support type they predominantly provided (e.g. social or emotional support). This provided a picture of participants' instructional practice to address Research Question 1a.

Next, the participants took part in audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews, which were conducted remotely. A semi-structured interview schedule was chosen to probe and extend the questionnaire responses (Research Question 1a), and address the remaining research aims: how the LSS structure their socioemotional instruction (Research Question 1b), and the factors impacting the extent of their socioemotional practice (Research Question 2).

## *Data analysis*

Questionnaire data were gathered into frequencies (see [Table 1](#) for illustration). Of note, the time logs' frequency analysis identified the participating LSS's support practices towards children with and without SEND. Results were interpreted according to socio-cultural theories: the more the LSS's support practices were contingent on children's areas of need, the more they were considered to promote children's learning.

Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006); therefore, the audio recording of the interviews was transcribed verbatim. Next, the transcriptions were interrogated on the research questions to proceed with the thematic coding. While codes addressing factors influencing LSS practice were new and grounded in the data, those concerning socioemotional practices echoed those of the multidimensional, scaffolding framework (see [Figure 1](#)) or the original framework in Bosanquet, Radford, and Webster (2016). Effective instructional strategies were those that fostered children's highest responsibility for socioemotional tasks and processes, such as interacting with peers.

To explore the reliability of the thematic analysis, we, the authors, calculated the inter-coder agreement (ICA; O'Connor and Joffe 2020). For this purpose, we trained an additional observer in the coding procedures. Next, we shared the coding system and four extracts of the transcriptions (i.e. 13% of interview data). The extracts were segmented in a way that included a) sections that we had coded (labels were removed) and b) sections with a coherent theme that had not been coded, known as 'irrelevant code' in the coding system. The external observer independently provided a label for each segment. Finally, ICA was measured by comparing, segment by segment, our analysis of these extracts with the external observer's. Cohen's Kappa was also calculated. The ICA high level (0.74) reassured us of the reliability of the analysis (O'Connor and Joffe 2020).

## *Findings*

### *Research question 1*

In the questionnaires, the participating LSS primarily reported supporting the engagement and completion of tasks for children with SEND in one-to-one (49%) or group settings (6%). Rarely did they suggest promoting the children's socioemotional education (8%), managing behaviour that challenges (e.g. bullying; 4%), or supporting procedural tasks (e.g. sorting classroom materials; 15%). The questionnaire data also illustrate that the LSS may have occasionally instructed children without SEND (16%) or not supported any children (2%).

Additionally, the questionnaires illustrate that the LSS might have provided this 'pedagogically-centered instruction' irrespective of children's needs. As a case in point,

the LSS suggested designing a high frequency of pedagogical instruction for children with social, emotional, and mental health difficulties (SEMH; 93%). Children with SEMH were also reported to be among the least supported socio-emotionally (7%). To further illustrate the point, children with communication and interaction difficulties were reported as primarily engaging with the LSS in pedagogical interaction (75%) or procedural tasks (25%), while they seemingly never received instruction on the socioemotional aspects of learning.

The interview data confirm this limited extension of socioemotional instruction while providing insight into the LSS's socioemotional tactics. For instance, the LSS mentioned supporting the emotions of children with SEND through a series of reassurance strategies. Primarily, they indicated providing *'gifts and praise after the ["correct"] completion of academic tasks'* to improve the children's self-esteem and *'encourage their future on-task behaviours'* (Interview 21). Secondly, they suggested facilitating routines to promote relaxation, such as *'taking the colours kit and choosing the colour – always the colour black'* (Interview 11). These repetitive activities were perceived as addressing the children's anxieties, and similarly encouraging task engagement and learning.

Another common 'emotion regulation' strategy was providing solutions to tasks that children with SEND faced difficulties completing (extract below). This solution allowed the children to address the task successfully. Next, the pupils received praise for this accomplishment. As a result, the children were reported feeling enhanced self-esteem and motivation to deal with future tasks.

The strategy [of supplying a solution to tasks] may be correct when I am not working on teaching concepts but on the child's level of satisfaction. A satisfaction that may then support his motivation to learn. Therefore, if my objective is to support the child's emotions because then they may work better [...], I will [supply the answer] and congratulate them. (Interview 13)

In the interviews, the LSS also discussed their social-support strategies. Predominantly, they indicated directing the peer interactions of children with (and without) SEND during group activities. For instance, an LSS member (extract below) reported setting the group work rules in advance, particularly encouraging the equal participation of all children in group talk and task achievement. Next, she oversaw that the children acted accordingly. Finally, she directed peer interaction to facilitate the interaction of a child with SEND.

Interviewer: 'How do you support the interactions [of the child with SEND] when in group settings?'

LSS: [...] In a board game, I recently controlled everyone following the same rule [...] and had the same chance to talk. Also, I invited the child [with SEND] to interact with [their peers], or I told their peers to involve them in the interaction [...].

Interviewer: 'And now and then, do you leave them talking? For instance, when do they interact?'

LSS: 'No, I am there like a hawk. I am there like a hawk'. (Interview 18)

Finally, the LSS mentioned employing social prompting strategies. Although these were occasionally mentioned in the interviews, an LSS member (extract below) reported that

such support could effectively enhance the social relationships and skills of children with communication and interaction difficulties.

'Although she [i.e. the child I support] has communication difficulties, I must say that she has improved a lot [...]. Initially, there were moments when I tried to get her to connect with other children, so I would say to her: "Why don't you ask that child about the colour?" [...]. Now, she has acquired relational skills, which I believe can be considered satisfactory'. (Interview 3)

## Research question 2

A potential factor influencing the extent of the LSS's socioemotional practice was considered to be the type of needs of the children they predominantly worked with. Many LSS particularly reported working with children without socioemotional needs, thereby preferring to give pedagogical support and other types of assistance (extract below).

[My type of support] varies according to the children's problems and difficulties [...]. I have been assisting children with cognitive difficulties; hence, I did not need to manage their [negative] behaviours because there was no need to do so'. (Interview 8)

Furthermore, the LSS frequently indicated that the national curriculum guidelines have a structural influence on LSS's socioemotional practice. These seemingly persuade schools, parents, teachers, and LSS to prioritise literacy and arithmetic basics and rarely promote socio-emotional learning. As such, they may create a social misconception (extract below) that schooling is about academic learning and nothing more.

Interviewer: 'Why did [you provide mainly pedagogical] support and less [socioemotional assistance]?'

LSS: '[...] Because they must learn. They must learn to read, write, and calculate. We are going back to the 1950s; it is like that'. (Interview 12)

The prioritisation of academic learning was also perceived to be evident in the LSS's initial training programme. As a result, an LSS member (extract below) indicated that most LSS feel unprepared to deal with anything but academic support and therefore omit socio-emotional education entirely from their practice.

Interviewer: 'Do you think that LSS support activities and their variations are shaped by the LSS training [...]'?

LSS: 'Yes, probably. [...] The school focuses on learning [subjects] [...], while teachers and LSS do not take into consideration emotions and relations [...], and maybe we are less prepared and avoid those matters'. (Interview 14)

Finally, the LSS reported that COVID-19 social distancing regulations applied during the data collection could limit their peer interaction support. These regulations invited schools to arrange classrooms so that '*children are seated at individual desks in rows, making it difficult for them to form groups*' (Interview 27). Consequently, group activities and the social support provided by the LSS were perceived as significantly compromised, leaving academic assistance as their primary focus. However, the relative rarity with which

this argument concerning COVID-19 regulations or other comments appearing in the interviews – namely, social prompting strategies – justifies its minor consideration in the rest of this paper.

## Discussion

This research explored the socioemotional instruction of a small sample of LSS in Italian primary schools (RQ1), and the factors influencing their practice (RQ2). Before discussing the research findings, it is noteworthy that this study relied on reported data. This, when coupled with the request for the participants to describe socioemotional strategies which are difficult to talk through in a timely interview setting, might not have captured the variety and depth of their socioemotional instruction. Moreover, the research did not examine: a) the classroom presence of assistants for autonomy and communication, and b) the individual education plans of the students described, particularly whether these included socioemotional interventions. These factors could have similarly interfered with the validity of the findings. For instance, the classroom presence of these assistants might have complemented the participants' social support for children with (severe) SEND, potentially curtailing it. Finally, the research's small sample size (31 LSS) might generate scepticism regarding the generalisability of the findings.

The research questionnaires illustrated that the participating LSS primarily reported delivering pedagogical support to children with SEND, such as promoting their completion of tasks. Rarely did they indicate assisting the children with SEND with socioemotional learning; furthermore, they occasionally reported instructing children without SEND.

In addition, the questionnaires showed that this pedagogically-centred instruction was designed irrespective of the children's needs. Indeed, children with communication and interaction difficulties or social, emotional, and mental health difficulties were reported to receive the same high level of pedagogical support, if not more so than their peers with cognition and learning difficulties. Concurrently, children with these 'socioemotional difficulties' were found to receive limited socioemotional instruction. As such, the children might not have been stimulated in learning matters where they seemed to lag behind and need the most support.

Compared with these data, the participants provided a different picture in the interviews. When addressing RQ2's line of questioning, the LSS notably suggested that they commonly orient their support according to children's needs. Thus, they reported mostly providing pedagogical support to children with cognition and learning difficulties, whereas they might have given socioemotional instruction to children with socioemotional needs.

These conflicting results may be accounted for by the nature of the interviews and questionnaires. While the questionnaires collected information on the LSS's classwork over the three school days before the questionnaires' completion, the interview responses frequently went beyond this period (e.g. comparing past and present). Also, the LSS gave abstract reflections when interviewed (e.g. if clauses). Thus, interviews could have described principles informing the LSS's general practice in, for instance, their entire school year while being a tentative source of information for the three days of practice upon which the findings from the questionnaires rely.

Recent research seems nonetheless more in line with the results from the questionnaires. For instance, Borgonovi and Ciletti (2018) and D'Alessio (2012) observed primary- and secondary-school LSS across eight Italian classrooms. They showed that the participating LSS predominantly, if not always, supported children's completion of academic tasks regardless of their specific areas of need.

An explanation for LSS's pedagogically-centred practice across the current and existing research potentially lies in their initial training. In this study's interviews, participants suggested they were trained on subject knowledge and academically based pedagogies. Whereas they reported receiving much less training on how to support children's socio-emotional development. Accordingly, they perceived that they were better prepared for academic instruction and thus preferred this practice above all.

Similar findings were also reported in the literature. Gianferrari's (2010) survey involving 1,377 primary- and secondary-school LSS indicated that the LSS had taken training courses on teaching methodologies but fewer on socio-emotional instruction. Alarming, the surveyed LSS also judged socio-emotional training to be inapplicable to their practice (e.g. it was seen as inconsistent with their classroom realities). Hence, they might provide limited support for this aspect of learning, preferring to provide academic-based support to children.

Another factor potentially limiting LSS's socioemotional support is the national curriculum. The participating LSS suggested that the national curriculum prioritises academic learning, or as Cerini, Fiorentini, and Testa (2007) perhaps more accurately put it, it sets multiple, clear academic goals for literacy and maths. Concerning socioemotional learning achievements, the national curriculum is vaguer (Cerini, Fiorentini, and Testa 2007). Consequently, some practitioners like participants might (mis)understand that the curriculum primarily aims to support children's academic success, whereas socioemotional learning is of minor, if any, importance. As a result, LSS (and teachers) might prefer academic-based instruction for children with and without SEND.

Although this is perhaps an unintentional product of existing Italian national policies, policymakers and school practitioners should not ignore the consequence of a teaching pattern that might not maximise children's socioemotional development, particularly for those with socioemotional difficulties. Indeed, limited socioemotional instruction might discourage children from learning effective social strategies when interacting or establishing friendly relationships with peers (Baines, Blatchford, and Kutnick 2017). Moreover, a few instructions on socioemotional themes might insufficiently prepare children to regulate their negative emotions, especially during stressful situations; this might lead to emotional distress and physical self-harm (O'Conner et al. 2017). Finally, inadequately supporting children to establish profitable, instructive social exchanges with peers or teachers and regulate their emotional distress during classroom tasks might lead children to withdraw from the classwork and learn little.

As a factor that might further compromise children's learning, at least among those included in this research, the tactics reported by the participating LSS did not seem to effectively scaffold the children's socioemotional processes and academic learning. Besides the low-level support strategy of reassuring the children by, for instance, praising their accomplishments, which could enhance their sense of satisfaction and wellbeing while promoting on-task behaviour (Denham, Hideko, and Bassett 2014), the interviewed LSS reported practices that could be counterproductive for the children's socioemotional

learning. For instance, the LSS reported overly directing the turn-talking of children with and without SEND during group tasks by inviting the group to include children with SEND in the talk. According to our multidimensional, scaffolding framework (Figure 1), this 'guided interaction' may minimise the children's responsibility for peer interactions and thus their social skill learning potential (Highton 2017). A second 'socioemotional strategy' identified in the interviews is possibly more concerning: providing solutions to classroom tasks when the children face difficulties in completing them and next praising them for this achievement. This way, the participants believed they were promoting children's happiness and motivation to deal with future tasks. The high-level support, however, seems more likely to transfer minor, if any, responsibility for the (academic) task completion to the children, thereby compromising their thinking and academic learning (Bosanquet, Radford, and Webster 2016). Nor might the practice promote children's control over positive emotions and self-motivation in future tasks; these positive emotions depend on the LSS's provision of the task solution and consequent praising.

### *Implications for policy and practice*

The research findings, particularly regarding the potentially limited and inappropriate socioemotional instruction in Italian LSS, may warrant a reconsideration of the current LSS training model and national curriculum in Italy (and beyond). Notably, the Italian national curriculum should explicitly reference children's socioemotional development goals, such as independently interacting in a group or managing a group task effectively, alongside academic objectives. As a result, an enhanced level of socioemotional education in Italian LSS (and teachers) could be achieved. Moreover, to enhance both the level and quality of socioemotional education, sociocultural theories and socioemotional scaffolding pedagogies should comprise a more significant proportion of Italian LSS training. The multidimensional, scaffolding framework (Figure 1) could be a valuable tool for this endeavour. This, alongside the original scaffolding framework in Bosanquet, Radford, and Webster (2016), provides practitioners with a way of designing effective socioemotional and pedagogical strategies that align with sound theoretical principles about learning.

The current research contributes to raising awareness of the importance of socioemotional instruction among practitioners, researchers and politicians. More international research is nonetheless urgently needed to extend our understanding of learning support staff's socioemotional practices. Learning support staff's socioemotional instruction is essential for the wellbeing and academic learning of children with and without SEND. Thus, the educational community should ensure optimal educational conditions to enable learning support staff to implement this crucial instruction effectively.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **Funding**

This publication was supported by the Economic Social Research Council — UK Research and Innovation under Grant ES/Y007387/1.

## References

- Baines, E., P. Blatchford, and P. Kutnick. 2017. *Promoting Effective Group Work in the Primary Classroom: A Handbook for Teachers and Practitioners*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.
- Blatchford, P., A. Russell, and R. Webster. 2011. *Reassessing the Impact of Teaching Assistants: How Research Challenges Practice and Policy*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.
- Borgonovi, E., and L. Ciletti. 2018. *La rete pubblico-privato per l'inclusione scolastica dei bambini con bisogni educativi speciali: Teorie, legislazione e buone pratiche di leadership [Public-Private Network for the Educational Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs]*. Milan, Italy: Franco Angeli.
- Bosanquet, P., J. Radford, and R. Webster. 2016. *The Teaching Assistant's Guide to Effective Interaction: How to Maximise Your Practice*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.
- Cerini, G., C. Fiorentini, and E. Testa. 2007. *Indicazioni per il curricolo: Analisi, proposte, percorsi possibili [Curriculum Guidelines: Analyses, Proposals, and Possible Pathways]*. Rome, Italy: Centro Iniziativa Democratica Insegnanti.
- Ciletti, L. 2023. "The Role of Primary-School Support Staff in Italy: A Case for Re-Thinking Their Professional Characteristics." *European Journal of Special Educational Needs* 39 (5): 729–743. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08856257.2023.2282248>.
- D'Alessio, S. 2012. "Integrazione Scolastica and the Development of Inclusion in Italy: Does Space Matter?" *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 16 (5–6): 519–534. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2012.655495>.
- Denham, S. A., H. Hideko, and T. W. Bassett. 2014. "The Socialization of Emotional Competence." In *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research*, edited by E. G. Joan and P. D. Hastings, 590–613. New York City, New York, USA: Guilford Publications.
- Di Michele, P. 2020. "Disabilità e inclusione scolastica: Una ricerca sugli assistenti all'autonomia e alla comunicazione [Disability and Scholastic Inclusion: A Study Over the Figure of the Assistant to Autonomy and Communication]." *L'integrazione scolastica e sociale* 19 (3): 127–146. <https://doi.org/10.14605/ISS1932011>.
- Gianferrari, G. 2010. *Profilo professionale e competenze dei docenti neoassunti [Professional Profile and Competencies of Newly Employed Teachers]*. Turin, Italy: Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli (FDA).
- Giangreco, M. F. 2009. *Critical Issues Brief: Concerns About the Proliferation of One-To-One Paraprofessionals*. Arlington, Virginia, USA: Council for Exceptional Children, Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities.
- Highton, S. S. 2017. "Teaching Assistants' Influence on the Peer Relationships of Pupils with SEND: A Grounded Theory Study from the Perspective of Teaching Assistants." PhD diss., University of Essex. [https://repository.tavistockandportman.ac.uk/view/creators/Highton=3ASean\\_S=3A=3A.html](https://repository.tavistockandportman.ac.uk/view/creators/Highton=3ASean_S=3A=3A.html).
- Leeuwen, A. V., and J. Janssen. 2019. "A Systematic Review of Teacher Guidance During Collaborative Learning in Primary and Secondary Education." *Educational Research Review* 27:71–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2019.02.001>.
- Low, J. 2019. "A Pragmatic Definition of the Concept of Theoretical Saturation." *Sociological Focus* 52 (2): 131–139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2018.1544514>.
- O'Connor, R., J. De Feyter, A. Carr, J. L. Luo, and H. Romm. 2017. *A Review of the Literature on Social and Emotional Learning for Students Ages 3–8: Teacher and Classroom Strategies That Contribute to Social and Emotional Learning (Part 3 of 4)*. Washington, DC, USA: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic. <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.
- O'Connor, C., and H. Joffe. 2020. "Intercoder Reliability in Qualitative Research: Debates and Practical Guidelines." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19:160940691989922–. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919899220>.
- Salisbury, N. 2017. "An Exploration of Teaching Assistants' Views on How They Support Children During Unstructured Times and Analysis of TA-Pupil Interactions on the Playground." PhD diss. (D.Ed.Psy), University College London.



- Van De Pol, J., M. Volman, and J. Beishuizen. 2011. "Scaffolding in Teacher-Student Interaction: A Decade of Research." *Educational Psychology Review* 22 (3): 271–296. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-010-9127-6>.
- Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA: Harvard University Press.
- Webster, R., and A. A. D. Boer. 2023. *Teaching Assistants, Inclusion and Special Educational Needs: International Perspectives on the Role of Paraprofessionals in Schools*. Abingdon, Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.