

## The Role of Special Education Support Staff in Primary Schools

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**Abstract:** *Special education support staff are increasingly recognized as vital contributors to the success of inclusive education in primary schools. This article discusses the multifaceted role of these professionals, drawing on recent research and official reports. It highlights how support staff assist not only children with special educational needs but also teachers and the entire learning community. The paper also considers challenges faced by support staff and proposes recommendations for better training and collaboration. The aim is to contribute to current discussions on improving inclusive practices in primary education.*

**Keywords:** *special education, support staff, primary school, inclusion, teacher assistant, paraprofessional.*

### Introduction

Inclusive education has become a global priority, encouraging schools to accommodate diverse learners within mainstream settings (UNESCO, 2020). In primary schools, special education support staff, such as teaching assistants, paraprofessionals, and learning support aides, play a crucial role in making this inclusion effective (Giangreco et al., 2017). Although teachers are responsible for planning and delivering instruction, support staff often provide the necessary individual attention and adaptations to help children with special educational needs (SEN) thrive.

One of the main tasks of special education support staff is to assist pupils who require additional help. Research shows that targeted one-to-one or small group support can have a positive effect on pupils' academic and social development (Webster et al., 2021). For example, support staff may modify tasks, explain instructions in simpler language, or use visual aids to reinforce learning. They also help children develop independence by scaffolding tasks rather than completing them for the child (Alborz et al., 2009).

Support staff not only focus on academic needs but also address social and emotional well-being. Many children with SEN face difficulties forming peer relationships or managing emotions (Symes and Humphrey, 2011). A skilled teaching assistant can mediate peer interactions and encourage inclusive play during breaks, helping reduce feelings of isolation.

The benefits of support staff extend to classroom teachers. Teachers report that having additional adult help allows them to manage diverse needs more effectively and maintain a positive learning environment (Blatchford et al., 2012). However, studies also point out that the impact of support staff depends on clear role definition and communication. When teachers and assistants plan together, the support is more meaningful and aligned with learning goals (Webster et al., 2013).

Professional development is crucial for maximising the effectiveness of support staff. A report by the Education Endowment Foundation (2021) recommends structured training focused on how to deliver interventions and promote pupil independence. Unfortunately, support staff often receive minimal training compared to teachers, which can limit their potential contribution (Giangreco, 2021).

Despite their essential role, support staff face several challenges. They may experience low pay, limited job security, and a lack of recognition for their work (Bourke & Carrington, 2007). These conditions can lead to high turnover, disrupting the continuity of support for pupils who rely on familiar adults (Butt, 2018).

Another issue is the risk of over-reliance on support staff for pupils with SEN. Research warns that if not carefully managed, constant adult assistance may limit children's opportunities to interact with peers and develop autonomy (Giangreco et al., 2017). Therefore, inclusive practices must ensure that support staff complement, not replace, inclusive teaching strategies used by the teacher.

## Conclusion

Current literature and recent guidelines suggest that special education support staff are indispensable to inclusive primary education. They enable pupils with SEN to participate more fully in classroom activities and support teachers in managing diverse classrooms. To increase their positive impact, schools should provide ongoing training, foster close collaboration between teachers and support staff, and ensure that their work promotes pupil independence rather than dependency. Addressing these areas can help create a more inclusive and equitable primary education system.

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