



**NCFE**

PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS:

**Exploring the vital, specialist  
role of the Teaching  
Assistant for children and  
young people's holistic  
education and wellbeing.**

Conducted by NCFE  
May 2023

A young girl with blonde hair, a woman with long brown hair, and a young boy with blonde hair are sitting at a table, focused on painting. The girl is on the left, wearing a white floral dress. The woman is in the center, looking down at the work. The boy is on the right, wearing a light blue shirt. They are surrounded by various art supplies like paint palettes and brushes. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a classroom or workshop setting.

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# Introduction

By Angie Rogers, Subject Specialist in Teaching and Learning at NCFE

## Research carried out during the lockdown identified the role of the Teaching Assistant (TA) as a vital resource for schools dealing with challenges brought on by Covid.

Work by the International Literacy Centre and the UCL Institute of Education<sup>1</sup> stated that TAs had been 'pivotal in allowing schools to keep functioning' and that it was 'hard to see how schools could have managed without them.'



Key findings showed that, during the winter 2021 lockdown, almost half of Teaching and Classroom Assistants (49%) covered staff absences, enabling schools to stay open to vulnerable and key worker children. It also found that 88% supported vulnerable and key worker children in school, and just over half (51%) managed a whole class or bubble on their own.

When we spoke to members of the public as part of our Teaching Assistant campaign, **All I Do**, some of their responses were in contrast. "They keep them busy. Keep them quiet," one person boldly stated. Another believed that Teaching Assistants are "mostly just helping the teachers rather than helping the children." It was only a small sample but showed that there's a lot of work to do in raising awareness of Teaching Assistants and the value they bring in supporting the needs of children and young people, and this stretches way beyond the implications of Covid.

The value of specialist intervention from experienced Teaching Assistants is well known within education, and their role is appreciated. Yet when we see the headlines warning of widescale

<sup>1</sup> UNSUNG HEROES: The role of teaching assistants and classroom assistants in keeping schools functioning during lockdown

redundancies, with Teaching Assistants always the first at risk, where is the public outcry? Where are the petitions to the Government? For example, a National Association of Head Teachers survey last year highlighted that, because of increasing pressure on budgets, 66% of school leaders believe they will need to consider making Teaching Assistants redundant or reducing their hours. Expectations of the role have evolved over the past decade and many Teaching Assistants hold a wide range of skill-based experiences, along with higher level qualifications at Level 3 and above. It's justifiable that they should be recognised, and the role professionalised for the outstanding part they play.

Research analysis from the Supporting SEND Report in 2021 identified that Teaching Assistants are most likely to be allocated children with special educational needs and disabilities. A poll last year by the research organisation Teacher Tapp showed that 88% of primary teachers and 81% of secondary teachers feel they don't have all the help they need to support students with SEND.

A shift in mindset from those in the educational sector will help to raise the profile of Teaching Assistants. This must also be coupled with more vocal support and recognition of the role from the Government and media. NCFE is committed to enhancing practice through impactful CPD, tailored training opportunities in relation to skill sets, and enabling Teaching Assistants to be deployed appropriately in supporting children and young people to be the best they can possibly be, now and in the future.

I'm hopeful that we can leave a legacy and help more people understand and become advocates for Teaching Assistants. And whilst this public perception is, of course, important, the real long-term change I want to see is that when budgets inevitably get squeezed, Teaching Assistants are fought for, protected, and cherished. By continuing the cyclical process of hiring and firing Teaching Assistants when times get tough, there's only really one loser, the children themselves.

# Summary of key findings

**The Teaching Assistants survey intended to act as a pulse check for those currently working in the role.** Using a sample size of more than 150 active Teaching Assistants, we asked several questions around job security, whether they had considered leaving the profession, and if they had all the tools and resources they need to effectively support learners with SEND.

A supplementary aim of the survey was to gather wider perceptions of the role, with more than 120 additional respondents made up of people working in the education sector, parents, carers, and others. Here we asked if they thought the role of a Teaching Assistant is respected and what they felt Teaching Assistants were responsible for day-to-day.

Our analysis of the survey highlighted key concerns that Teaching Assistants from a variety of settings currently share and are an indicator that change is needed in the future, particularly if flagship recommendations, such as those from the SEND Review, are to be successfully delivered.

**1 The majority of current Teaching Assistants have thought about, or are actively looking, to change careers.**  
Almost three quarters (73%) of Teaching Assistants indicated that they had thought about moving careers, or were actively looking to do so, in the last 12 months. 12% were actively looking for a new role.

**2 Just under half of Teaching Assistants feel they have complete job security.**  
Over half (53%) of respondents felt they either had a little, none or didn't know when it came to job security. Just under a third (31%) felt they had a little, with 15% saying not really.

**3 More than a third of Teaching Assistants feel very confident when supporting learners with specialist educational needs and disabilities (SEND).**  
More than one in ten Teaching Assistants did not feel confident when it comes to supporting learners with SEND, but 88% felt either fairly confident (50%) or very confident (38%).

**4 Less than one in five Teaching Assistants felt they had everything they needed to support learners with SEND.**  
Only 13% of Teaching Assistants indicated they had everything they needed to support learners with SEND. Over two in five (41%) said they did not have everything they needed, with 46% saying yes but it could be better.

From the non-Teaching Assistant survey group, 95% of respondents felt it was very important to provide expert support for learners with special educational needs and disabilities.

**5 Teaching Assistants want more time, training, and resources.**  
When asked what further support they require to assist learners with SEND, the overwhelming themes that emerged anecdotally were additional training, resources and time. Time and training were often linked, with a willingness for continuing professional development (CPD) but a lack of space in the day to do it. One respondent also indicated that they were often forced to pay for resources out of their own pocket.

**6 One in ten Teaching Assistants felt it was a highly respected and valued role.**  
Only 11% of Teaching Assistants surveyed felt their role was highly respected and valued. Just under half (49%) felt it was either not very respected or not respected at all, with 40% feeling Teaching Assistants are somewhat respected.

From the non-Teaching Assistant survey group, slightly more (12%) felt the role is highly respected and 43% felt it was either not very respected or not respected at all.

## Recommendations

While the survey was only ever intended as a snap shot, the data indicates there are shared concerns among Teaching Assistants when it comes to job security and the long-term sustainability of the role in its current state.

The results of the research showed a clear commitment from Teaching Assistants to continue in their role, as well as a desire and determination to develop themselves professionally so they are best placed to provide support for those who need it most.

The survey data, coupled with **our own roundtable** that brought together different perspectives from across the education sector, indicates that change is needed quickly if we are to avoid a crisis of support for some of the most vulnerable children in our schools.



### **1. Relying on passion alone is not sustainable. We must professionalise the role and ensure this is reflected in salary and improved access to training and development opportunities.**

The passion from the sector is tangible, as are the challenges impacting Teaching Assistants and indeed across the education sector, including funding and continuing professional training needs.

There is a risk of skilled Teaching Assistants being forced to move into other sectors, such as retail, where the salary expectations are higher. Increasing the base salary would ensure more Teaching Assistants remain in the role as well as attract new, passionate individuals into the sector.

Essential (meta) skills such as confidence should also be included within professional development. These skills are essential for Teaching Assistants to feel heard within an educational setting and ensure their expertise is being listened to and valued.

**2. Ensure the role of Teaching Assistant is fully integrated into educational settings. With better support and investment, Teaching Assistants can fully understand the needs and requirements of each individual and ensure learner-centred support is delivered.**

The relationship between Teacher, Teaching Assistant and parent/ carer must be strengthened. To achieve learner-centred care, these three key influencers need to work together and hold equal footing to ensure the best outcomes. The role of the TA is one that is specialised with discreet responsibilities and this professional status must be recognised and valued for its contribution to education.

A collaborative working relationship between Teaching Assistants and Teachers also means Teachers must be professionally supported. Many Teachers feel like they lack the skills and the confidence to effectively deploy Teaching Assistants in the classroom. There's a training need on both sides, as well as a responsibility for senior leadership to facilitate integration.



**3. Raise the profile of Teaching Assistants in the media and through government. With more exposure and a platform to have a voice, the role of Teaching Assistant can become a highly respected and desired position within educational settings.**

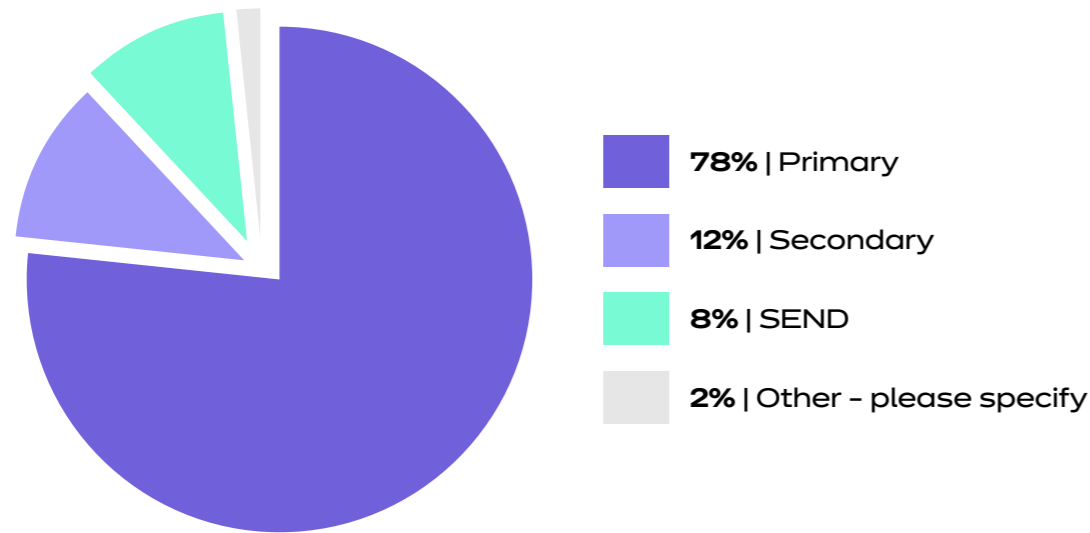
The Government should consider a similar approach to its 'Every Lesson Shapes a Life' campaign that has been put in place to recruit Teachers. By showing more people what Teaching Assistants do, and the vital role they play within the education system, the position could achieve parity with teachers.

Create a national network for Teaching Assistants. This would create a forum for best practice sharing, professional resources and development, as well as a place for peer-to-peer support. It could also act as a joined-up voice for Teaching Assistants in the sector.

# Full findings

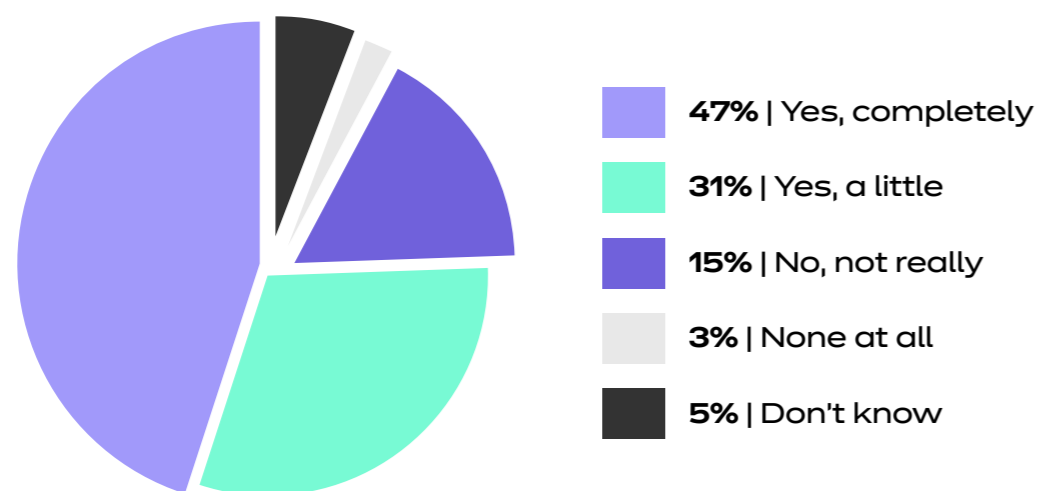
## Survey one | Current Teaching Assistants Respondents: 152

### 1. What type of setting do you work in?

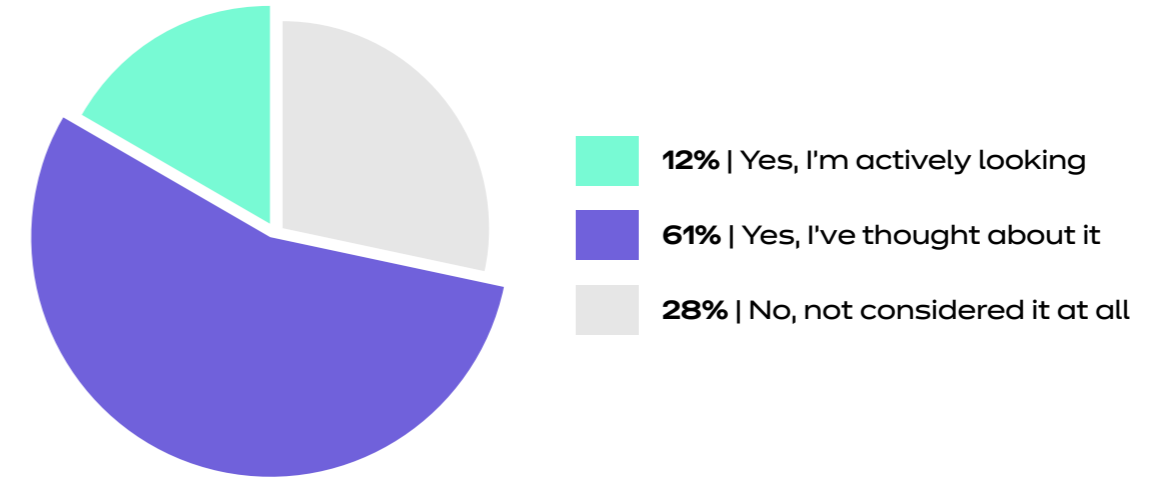


Other - please specify
College SEND
Nursery
Within a resource base for deaf children in a mainstream primary

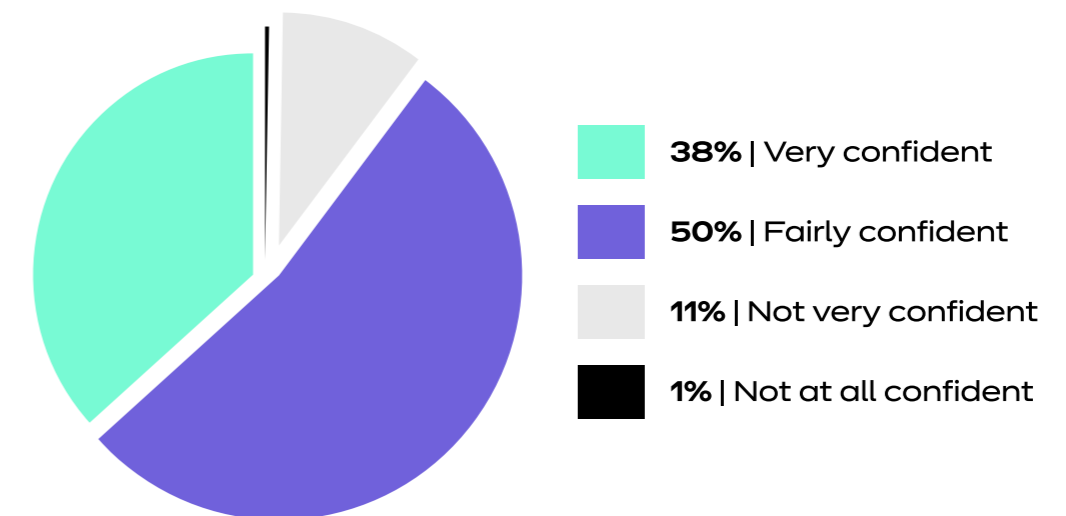
### 2. Do you have job security in your role as a Teaching Assistant?



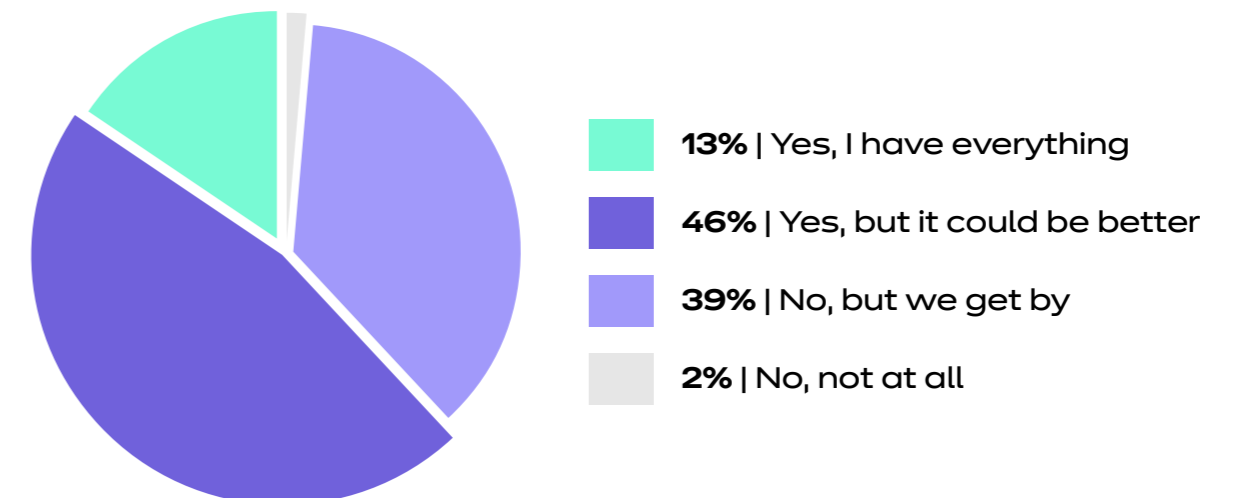
### 3. Have you considered moving careers in the last year?



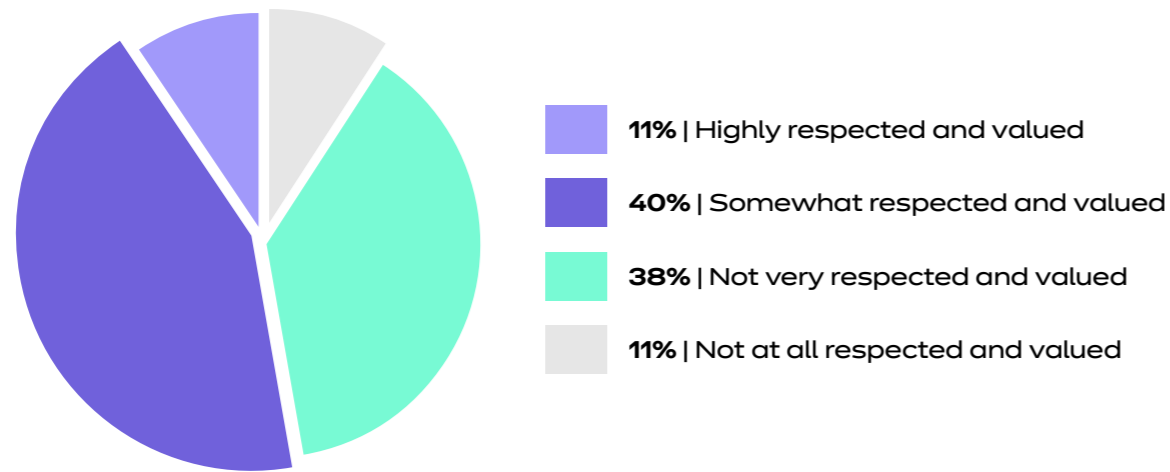
### 4. How confident do you feel supporting learners with special education needs and disabilities (SEND)?



### 5. Do you have everything you need to support learners with SEND?

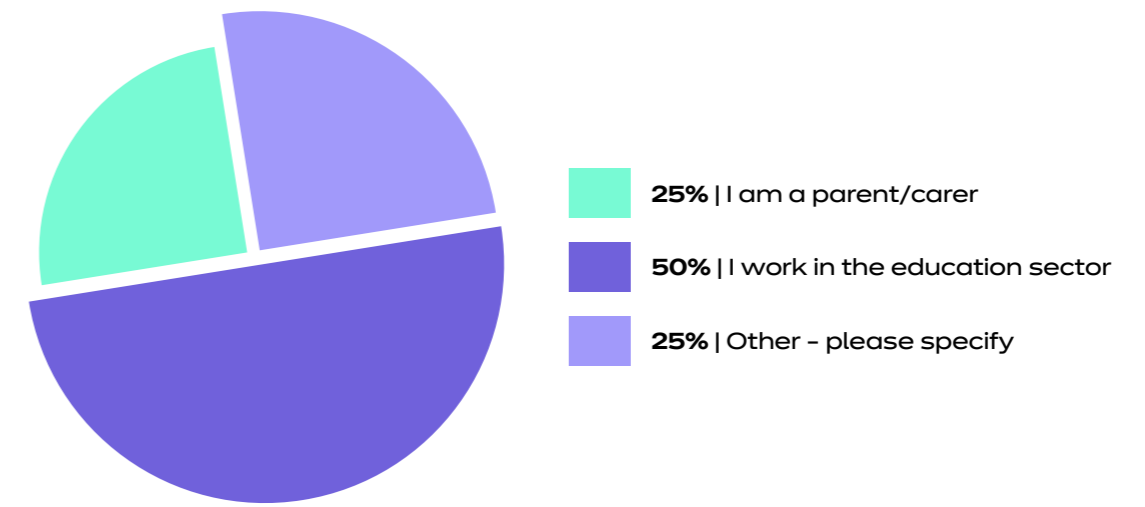


6. How respected and valued do you think the role of a Teaching Assistant is?



Survey two | Non-Teaching Assistants  
Respondents: 122

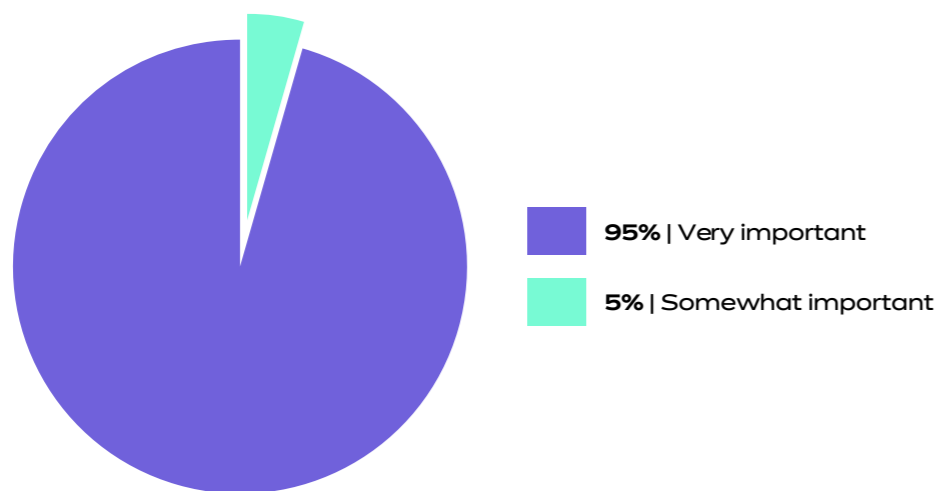
1. Which one of the following categories best represents you?



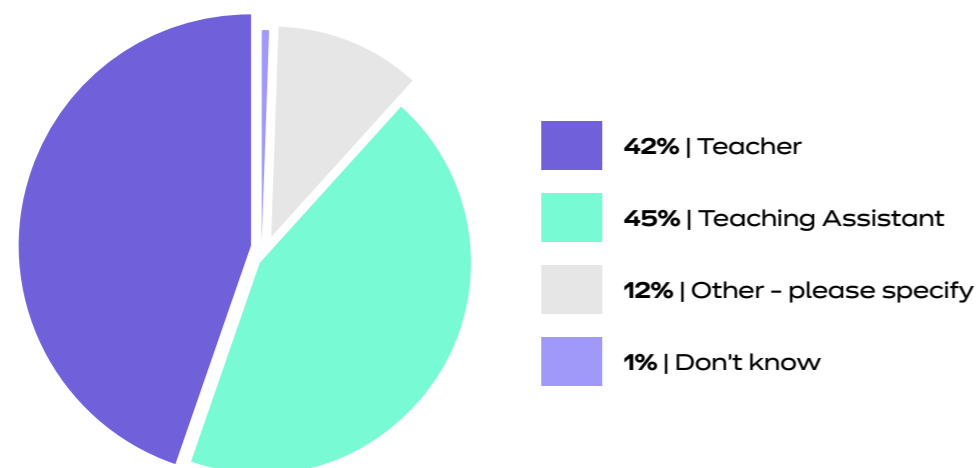
Other - please specify
Assessor of teaching assistants
Care
Carer
Ex nursery assistant for children with special needs
External Quality Assurer
Family support worker in a primary school
Freelance trainer / assessor
Grand parent
I am an ex teaching assistant
I used to be a TA
I was a TA Assessor and IQA
Local Councillor
Mental Health Sector.
Mother of TA
My son works in teaching assistant
Recently retired HLTA
Researcher (Creativity in teaching)
Retired headteacher
Retired parent
Retired ta
Retired teacher
Retired teacher /senco
Retired teaching assistant
Social care
student
Student for TA and volunteering in primary school with SEND children
Teacher



**2. How important do you think it is to provide expert support for learners with special educational needs and disabilities?**



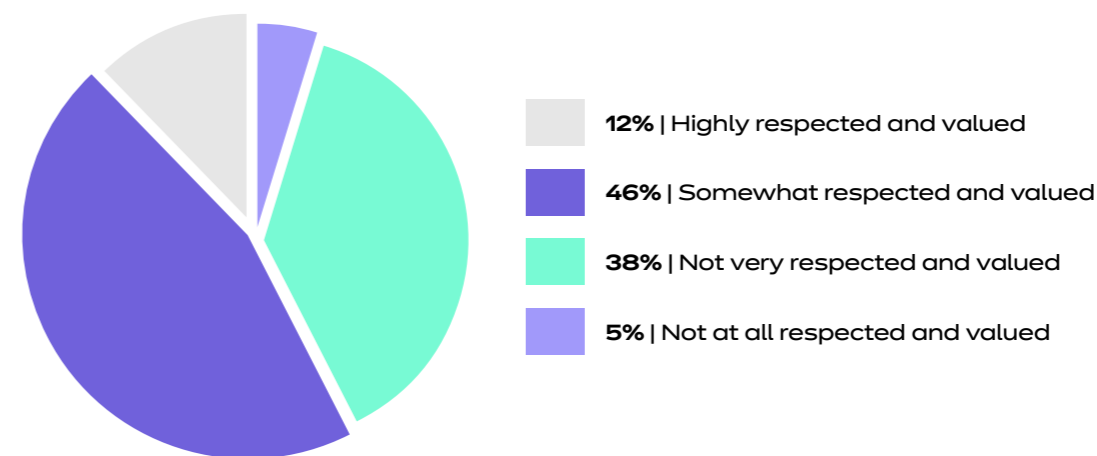
**3. Who do you think has most responsibility for delivering expert support for learners with special educational needs and disabilities?**



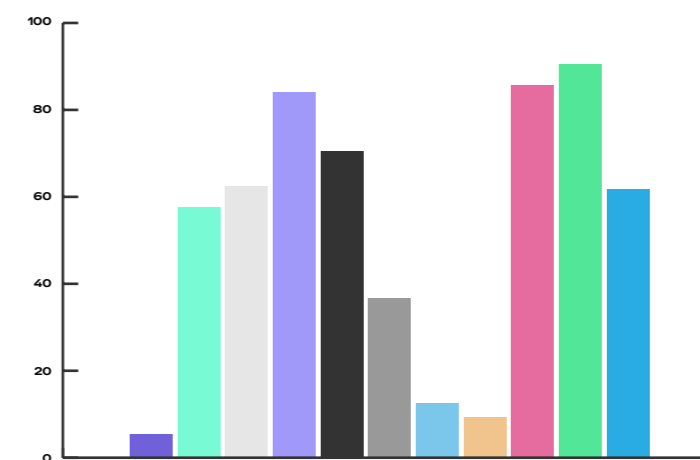
**Other - please specify**

- Expert trained in the specific needs in question, as per individual.
- Trained special education needs and disabilities practitioners (this may be TA and/or teachers)
- A combination of all
- Everyone
- Both the above together
- The government needs to fund the schools, who then need to deliver via teachers and TAs working together
- teacher and teaching assistant together
- SENCo
- A parent
- Both the teacher and the TA are responsible for the individual support needs of learners with learning difficulties or disabilities.
- SENCo
- Someone with knowledge and skills to deal specifically with the additional needs of the child. Job title is irrelevant.
- Teacher and teaching assistant

**4. How respected and valued do you think the role of a Teaching Assistant is?**



**5. What do you think are the main responsibilities of a Teaching Assistant? (Select all that apply)**



- 5.8% | Other - please specify
- 57.9% | Providing specialist skills
- 62.8% | Early Interventions
- 84.3% | One-to-one support
- 70.2% | Providing mental health and wellbeing support
- 36.4% | Carrying out non-academic duties
- 12.4% | Delivering a full lesson
- 9.9% | Cleaning the classroom
- 86% | Supporting all children in the classroom to complete activities and tasks
- 90.1% | Supporting children with additional needs
- 62.8% | Supporting children with their personal care

**Other - please specify**

- TA are the eyes and ears very important for safeguarding children
- Contributing to EHCPs, including participating in review meetings
- All of the above! I haven't ticked delivering a full lesson but HTLAs do need to do this too, more often than a lot of people think
- Preparing lesson resources
- Whatever the teacher needs support with
- In some cases covering full lessons on a regular basis