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Learning Support Assistants' Experiences of Managing Challenging Behaviour in Pupils with Autism and Other Complex Needs: A Qualitative Evidence Synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Learning support assistants (LSAs) and teaching assistants carry much of the daily work with pupils whose behaviour is challenging, yet their own accounts of this work have rarely been brought together. This qualitative evidence synthesis examined how LSAs experience and manage challenging behaviour when supporting pupils with autism and other complex needs, including social, emotional and mental health needs. Searches of PsycINFO, ERIC, CINAHL, Web of Science and Scopus were structured with the Population, Concept and Context framework. Four qualitative theses set in mainstream schools were purposively sampled for the depth of their first-person data and appraised with the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme qualitative checklist; all four met the checklist criteria. Their findings, author interpretations and participant quotations were synthesised using Thomas and Harden's three-stage thematic synthesis, with emotional labour, self-efficacy and a functional view of behaviour as sensitising lenses. Three analytical themes were developed: the personal cost of relational practice; experiential knowledge as the core competence; and systemic context and barriers to practice. Taken together, the themes suggest that LSAs manage behaviour mainly through their relationship with a particular child, that their confidence rests on knowing that child rather than on transferable, function-based knowledge, and that little time for supervision and reflection keeps this pattern in place. Because the synthesis rests on four studies and a single reviewer, the findings are tentative. They point to reflective supervision, function-based training and protected planning time as areas schools may wish to develop.

Keywords: Learning Support Assistants; Teaching Assistants; Challenging Behaviour; Autism; Emotional Labour; Qualitative Evidence Synthesis

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Introduction

Inclusive education has changed considerably over recent decades, and many pupils with complex neurodevelopmental conditions, such as autism and cerebral palsy, are now taught in mainstream as well as special settings. At the time of Lombardi's (2016) study, about a quarter (25.9%) of UK pupils with a statement of special educational needs or an Education, Health and Care Plan had a diagnosis of autism. Challenging behaviour is common among pupils with neurodevelopmental conditions and intellectual disabilities (Nicholls et al., 2020), and it often persists over long periods (Adams et al., 2023; Nicholls et al., 2023). It may include aggression, self-injury and severe withdrawal. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE, 2015) defines behaviour that challenges by its effects rather than its form: behaviour of such intensity, frequency or duration that it threatens the quality of life or physical safety of the person or others, and is likely to lead to restrictive responses or to exclusion from services.

Learning support assistants (LSAs), also called teaching assistants (TAs), are central to this support. They give direct academic, social and behavioural help to pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, often on a one-to-one basis. Abbott et al. (2011) described LSAs as key players in inclusion but questioned whether their professional needs were being met. Large-scale research on teaching assistants in England

found that they were often deployed to work with the pupils who had the greatest needs, with little preparation or time to plan with teachers (Blatchford et al., 2012). In this article, the two terms are treated as equivalent, and "LSA" is used for both unless a study's own term is reported.

Several studies report that LSAs receive limited training for this work. Teaching assistants supporting children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder described gaps in knowledge and training as barriers to effective practice (Greenway & Edwards, 2021), and TAs supporting autistic pupils described a poorly defined role, limited training and support, and a need to improvise (Lombardi, 2016). Without formal guidance, LSAs may rely on intuition and personal values (Elston-Green, 2017). This matters because function-based approaches such as Positive Behaviour Support (PBS) depend on staff training and on organisational systems that help staff use what they have learned (Konstantinidou et al., 2023).

The work also carries emotional demands. In a recent focus group study in a special school, teaching assistants described responding to challenging behaviour with little guidance from senior leaders, suppressing their own emotions during incidents and wanting structured opportunities to make sense of what had happened (Leggett & Ostashchenko, 2026). School staff who are repeatedly exposed to pupils' distress may also report symptoms consistent with secondary traumatic stress (Gordon et al., 2026). Even so, the emotional side of one-to-one support, as distinct from the LSA's teaching role, has received less attention (Kelly, 2020).

Existing studies tend to examine either the emotional experience of LSAs or the strategies they use, but seldom how the two shape each other. Bringing together LSAs' own qualitative accounts offers a way to examine how emotional experience, confidence and understanding of behaviour combine in daily practice. This article therefore reports a qualitative evidence synthesis of LSAs' experiences of managing challenging behaviour among pupils with autism and other complex needs. It seeks to identify the psychological, practical and environmental factors that shape LSA practice and the strategies LSAs use to support pupils' learning and well-being. Figure 1 sets out the relationships the synthesis examines.

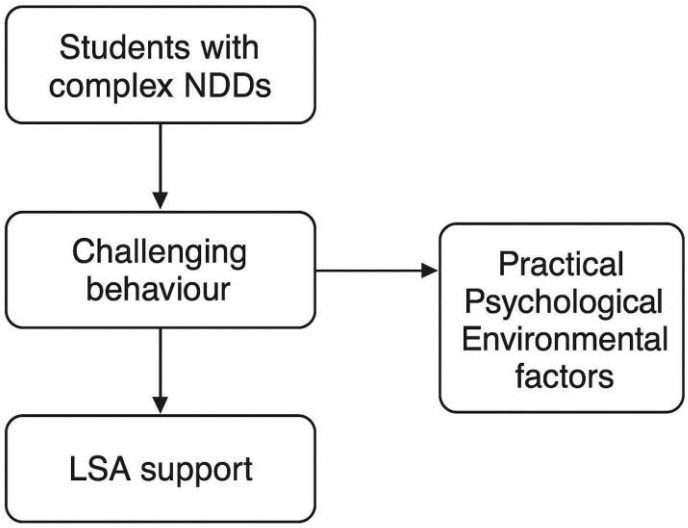


Figure 1. Pupils with Complex Neurodevelopmental Conditions, Challenging Behaviour, LSA Support and the Factors That Shape It

Aim and Review Questions

The aim of this synthesis was to examine qualitative research on LSAs' experiences of managing challenging behaviour among pupils with complex needs. Four review questions guided the work:

1. How do LSAs describe the challenging behaviour they meet when supporting pupils with autism and other complex needs?
2. What psychological, practical and environmental factors shape LSAs' experiences of managing this behaviour?

3. What approaches do LSAs report using, and how do these compare with function-based approaches such as PBS?
4. What implications for practice, training and future research follow from the synthesis?

Theoretical Framework

Three perspectives were used as sensitising lenses during the final, interpretive stage of the synthesis. Each addresses one of the factors named in the review questions: how behaviour is understood, how confident LSAs feel, and what the work costs them emotionally.

A functional perspective on behaviour holds that challenging behaviour usually serves a purpose for the person, such as gaining attention, escaping a demand, obtaining an item or meeting a sensory need (Carr, 1977). Functional analysis is the assessment method used to test these possibilities, and it has an extensive research base (Beavers et al., 2013). It is a method of assessment rather than a theory in its own right; it underpins function-based approaches such as PBS, in which support is planned around the likely purpose of a behaviour. Behavioural approaches are not the only option, and other psychological strategies may add to them (Woodcock & Blackwell, 2020). In this synthesis, the functional perspective served as a reference point: LSAs' accounts were examined for signs that they understood why a behaviour occurred, and for whether that understanding was used to plan support or only to respond in the moment.

Self-efficacy theory proposes that people's beliefs about their ability to carry out a task affect how much effort they make, how long they persist and how they cope with stress (Bandura, 1977, 1997). Bandura (1977) identified four sources of these beliefs: mastery experiences, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional states. The theory was used to examine where LSAs' confidence came from and whether it could be carried from one child or setting to another.

Emotional labour theory describes the work of managing one's own feelings in order to show the emotions a job requires (Hochschild, 1983). This may involve surface acting, in which the emotion displayed differs from the emotion felt, or deep acting, in which the worker tries to change what they feel. The theory was used to examine how LSAs managed their own responses during incidents and what this cost them over time.

Method

Design and Philosophical Position

The study was a qualitative evidence synthesis using thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Thematic synthesis was chosen because it moves from codes that stay close to the primary data, through descriptive themes, to analytical themes that go beyond the original studies. Rather than seeking every eligible study, the synthesis used purposive sampling, an approach recognised in qualitative evidence synthesis when the aim is depth of interpretation rather than exhaustive coverage (Ames et al., 2019; Benoot et al., 2016). The review is reported with reference to the ENTREQ statement for reporting syntheses of qualitative research (Tong et al., 2012).

The synthesis takes an interpretivist position. It assumes that LSAs' experience is shaped by their relationships, their settings and the needs of the children they support, and that understanding it requires interpretation of the meanings that participants and authors gave to events. This fits thematic synthesis, which aims to produce new interpretations from the findings of primary qualitative studies rather than to measure or count them (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Eligibility Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were set to match the review aim and questions.

Inclusion Criteria

To be eligible, a study had to meet all of the following criteria, defined with the Population, Concept and Context (PCC) framework:

1. Participants were learning support assistants or teaching assistants (or equivalent support staff) who gave direct support to pupils in an educational setting.
2. The study explored LSAs' lived experience qualitatively, including psychological impact (for example, emotional labour, anxiety or self-efficacy), practical and environmental factors (for example, training or support systems), or the strategies used to manage challenging behaviour.
3. The pupils supported had complex needs, including neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism or cerebral palsy, or social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, and the support involved responding to challenging behaviour.
4. The study was primary research using a recognised qualitative method (for example, interpretative phenomenological analysis, grounded theory or thematic analysis), or a mixed-methods study with a substantial qualitative component, and it reported rich qualitative data (author themes and participant quotations). Peer-reviewed articles and examined research theses were eligible. The full text had to be available in English.

Exclusion Criteria

A study was excluded if it met any of the following criteria:

1. It was a secondary analysis, such as a systematic review, integrative review, literature review or meta-analysis.
2. It was quantitative (for example, a large-scale survey or experiment), or it used mixed methods in which the qualitative component was not substantial enough for line-by-line coding.
3. It focused mainly on the experiences of teachers, parents, senior leaders or clinicians, with LSA experience mentioned only in passing.
4. It was not a research report (for example, a commentary, conference abstract, book review, editorial, short report or study protocol).

Search Strategy

The search was planned before it was run, using the PCC framework to set its boundaries.

The PCC Framework

The PCC framework, which is widely used to structure review questions, guided the choice of keywords (Table 1).

Table 1. Population, Concept and Context Framework for the Review

Component	Definition in this Study	Corresponding Keywords
Population	Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) or Teaching Assistants (TAs).	"Learning Support Assistant", "LSA", "Teaching Assistant", "TA","Paraprofessional", "Support Staff"
Concept	Lived professional experiences in Managing challenging behaviour, emotional labour, and self-efficacy	"Challenging Behaviour", "Problem Behavior", "Aggression", "Self-Injury", "Emotional Labour", "Experience", "Perspective", "Lived Experience", "Self-Efficacy"
Context	Educational settings, specifically relating to complex neurodevelopmental conditions (NDDs), autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and cerebral palsy (CP)	"Autism", "Autism Spectrum Disorder", "ASD", "Cerebral Palsy", "CP", "Neuro-developmental", "Complex Needs", "Special Education", "Mainstream"

Controlled vocabulary (subject headings, where available) and free-text terms were combined for each component (Table 2).

Table 2. Search Terms by PCC Component

Category	Keywords
Population	"Learning Support Assist*", "Teaching Assist*", "Paraprofessional*", "Support Staff"
Concept	"Challenging Behaviour*", "Problem Behavior*", "Aggression", "Self-Injury", "Emotional Labour*", "Experience*", "Self-Efficacy"
Context	"Autism*", "ASD", "Cerebral Palsy", "CP", "Neuro-developmental*", "Complex Need*", "Special Education"

Boolean operators and truncation were used as follows:

1. AND linked the three PCC components, so that results contained terms from all three: (Population) AND (Concept) AND (Context).
2. OR combined synonyms and alternative spellings within each component (for example, "LSA" OR "TA" OR "Paraprofessional").
3. Truncation (*) captured different word endings (for example, Assist* captures Assistant, Assistants and Assisting).

The core search string, adapted to the syntax of each database, was: ("learning support assist*" OR "teaching assist*" OR paraprofessional* OR "support staff") AND ("challenging behaviour*" OR "problem behavior*" OR aggression OR "self-injury" OR "emotional labour*" OR experience* OR "self-efficacy") AND (autism* OR ASD OR "cerebral palsy" OR CP OR "neuro-developmental*" OR "complex need*" OR "special education").

Databases

The search was run in the following databases:

1. PsycINFO, for psychological and behavioural research, including work on emotional labour and self-efficacy.
2. ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), for education research and policy literature on the LSA workforce.
3. CINAHL (Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature), for health-related behavioural research relevant to neurodevelopmental conditions.
4. Web of Science and Scopus, interdisciplinary citation databases used to widen the search beyond education journals.

Study Selection and Sampling

Records were screened in two steps, first on title and abstract and then on full text, against the eligibility criteria. Screening, appraisal and coding were carried out by the author as a single reviewer. From the studies that met the criteria, four were sampled purposively using three rules: (a) participants were LSAs or TAs speaking directly about their own experience; (b) the findings sections contained enough participant quotations and author interpretation to allow line-by-line coding; and (c) together, the studies covered the three areas of interest in the review questions (emotional experience, confidence and competence, and behaviour management in context). The number was limited to four so that each study could be coded in depth within the scope of the project. Because the sample was purposive rather than exhaustive, study selection is reported narratively, as ENTREQ allows for purposive sampling (Tong et al., 2012), and the work is described as a purposive qualitative evidence synthesis rather than a full systematic review.

The four sampled studies were research theses that used interviews or focus groups with teaching assistants in mainstream primary and secondary schools (Table 3). Kelly (2020) met the criteria for participants, method and focus on lived experience, but its participants worked one-to-one with a child, and challenging behaviour was not the study's main topic. It was included because its account of the

emotional experience of intensive one-to-one support bears directly on the review questions; this partial fit is noted as a limitation. Leggett and Ostashchenko (2026), a focus group study of teaching assistants' experiences of challenging behaviour in a special school, meets the eligibility criteria but was published online in 2025, after the corpus for this synthesis had been fixed. It was therefore not coded, but its findings are compared with those of the synthesis in the Discussion.

Table 3. Characteristics of the Included Studies

Study	Type	Participants and setting	Design and analysis	Main themes reported by the authors
Lombardi (2016)	Doctoral thesis (DEdPsy), Cardiff University	Teaching assistants supporting autistic pupils in mainstream primary schools; focus group, questionnaire (n = 50) and interviews with four TAs	Sequential mixed methods; qualitative phases analysed with thematic analysis (only qualitative findings used here)	Poorly defined role; limited training and support; improvising behaviour management on the teacher's behalf; significant emotional demands
Angel (2019)	Doctoral thesis (DEdCPsy), University of Sheffield	Three TAs in one English mainstream secondary school, each supporting at least one young person with SEMH needs and challenging behaviour	Interpretative phenomenological analysis; semi-structured interviews	Understanding the young person; processing emotions; individual approach to the TA role (TA attributes; familial associations)
Elston-Green (2017)	Thesis	Four TAs in mainstream primary schools who had completed autism-focused training	Interpretative phenomenological analysis; semi-structured interviews	Being a TA and role perceptions; applying learning to practice; TA experiences and perceptions of inclusion
Kelly (2020)	Professional doctorate thesis, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust/University of Essex	Four TAs in mainstream primary schools in London, each working one-to-one with the same child over time	Psychosocial design; two free association narrative interviews per participant; reflexive thematic analysis	Role; emotional experiences; relationships; change, transitions and endings

Quality Appraisal

Each study was appraised with the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme qualitative checklist (CASP, 2018). For Lombardi (2016), only the qualitative phases were appraised, because only those findings were used. Table 4 summarises the judgements. All four studies had a clear aim, used an appropriate qualitative design and recruitment strategy, collected data suited to the question, considered the researcher's role and ethical issues, used a systematic analysis and stated their findings clearly; each was judged to make a valuable contribution. No study was excluded or given less weight on quality grounds. As all four are theses, they were examined by their awarding institutions but did not pass through journal peer review.

Table 4. Summary of CASP Qualitative Checklist Appraisal

CASP question	Lombardi (2016)	Angel (2019)	Elston-Green (2017)	Kelly (2020)
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
5. Were the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
10. How valuable is the research?	Valuable	Valuable	Valuable	Valuable
Overall judgement	Include	Include	Include	Include

Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were extracted from the findings and discussion sections of each study using a structured form. Three kinds of data were recorded: the themes and subthemes reported by the authors; the authors' interpretations of their findings; and participant quotations, which preserve the voice of the LSAs. These extracts formed the raw data for the synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

Thematic synthesis is a method for bringing together the findings of several primary qualitative studies to develop new, higher-level themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Both first-order data (participant quotations) and second-order data (authors' themes and interpretations) were coded.

The synthesis followed three overlapping stages:

1. Line-by-line coding. The author coded the extracted text line by line, giving each phrase a code that described its content. Codes were kept close to the wording of participants or authors.
2. Developing descriptive themes. Codes with similar meanings were grouped to form descriptive themes that summarised what the studies reported in common.
3. Generating analytical themes. The descriptive themes were compared and related to one another, and examined through the three lenses set out in the Theoretical Framework. At this stage the question asked of the data changed from "what do the studies report?" to "what does this suggest about how LSAs' emotional experience, confidence and understanding of behaviour shape their practice?". The answers formed the analytical themes and the conceptual model.

The process was iterative: codes, descriptive themes and analytical themes were compared repeatedly and revised until they fitted the extracted data.

Ethics

This synthesis used only published or publicly deposited research, so formal ethical approval was not required. The original studies reported their own ethical approval and consent procedures, and no information that could identify participants, schools or pupils has been added in this synthesis.

Findings

Summary of the Included Studies

Lombardi (2016) used a sequential mixed-methods design to explore the self-efficacy of teaching assistants supporting autistic pupils in mainstream primary schools. A focus group informed a new questionnaire, and interviews were then held with four TAs with the highest and lowest scores; only the qualitative findings were used here. The findings described a poorly defined role, limited training and support, and TAs improvising how they managed the child on the teacher's behalf. Confidence in managing behaviour was linked to knowing the child "very well", and TAs described feeling "quite nervous sometimes" when they began. Participants described the emotional burden of supporting a child who was "really distraught" and the risk that an intense one-to-one relationship could become "unhealthy". TAs also showed an understanding of sensory triggers, such as the discomfort a tucked-in shirt could cause.

Angel (2019) used interpretative phenomenological analysis with three TAs in one English mainstream secondary school, each supporting at least one young person with SEMH needs and challenging behaviour. Three superordinate themes were reported: understanding the young person, processing emotions, and an individual approach to the TA role, which included TA attributes and familial associations. TAs described needing to be "calm, understanding, patient", drew on a "mummy side" when caring for pupils, and tried "not to make the SEN stand out" to peers. Angel linked these accounts to the value of supervision for reflective practice.

Elston-Green (2017) used interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore the experiences of four TAs in mainstream primary schools who had completed autism-focused training. The three overarching themes were being a TA and role perceptions, applying learning to practice, and TAs' experiences and perceptions of inclusion. TAs drew mainly on "intuitive practice" and "personal values" rather than on the conscious "application of theory", and the study identified a "low value placed on talking and reflection" about practice.

Kelly (2020) used a psychosocial design, with two free association narrative interviews with each of four TAs in mainstream primary schools in London, all of whom worked one-to-one with the same child over time. Data were analysed with reflexive thematic analysis. Kelly set the TAs' experiences against austerity and cuts in education funding and the changing roles of TAs. Their emotional experiences included feelings of reward alongside isolation, boredom and guilt, the effort of keeping feelings in, and "both/and" experiences in which opposing feelings were held together; one subtheme was titled "Why am I doing this?" (Kelly, 2020, p. 136).

Breaking the findings down in this way allowed them to be recoded and regrouped across studies, beyond each author's own framework.

Coding and Descriptive Themes

After extraction, the findings were synthesised in the three stages described in the Method.

Stage 1: Line-by-Line Coding

The extracted themes, interpretations and participant quotations were examined line by line, and each distinct idea was given a short descriptive code that stayed close to the original wording.

Coding produced a large set of codes across the four studies, many of them short participant phrases. Table 5 shows a sample of these codes and the descriptive theme to which each was assigned.

Table 5. Sample of Codes and Their Grouping into Descriptive Themes

Code (participant or author wording)	Source	Descriptive theme
"unhealthy" one-to-one relationship	Lombardi (2016)	A
child who was "really distraught"	Lombardi (2016)	A
"mummy side"	Angel (2019)	A

Code (participant or author wording)	Source	Descriptive theme
"calm, understanding, patient"	Angel (2019)	A
reward alongside guilt; keeping feelings in	Kelly (2020)	A
"Why am I doing this?" (subtheme title, p. 136)	Kelly (2020)	A
"quite nervous sometimes" when starting	Lombardi (2016)	B
knowing the child "very well"	Lombardi (2016)	B
improvising management on the teacher's behalf	Lombardi (2016)	B
"intuitive practice"	Elston-Green (2017)	B
"personal values"	Elston-Green (2017)	B
limited training and support	Lombardi (2016)	C
"low value placed on talking and reflection"	Elston-Green (2017)	C
austerity and cuts in education funding	Kelly (2020)	C
"not to make the SEN stand out"	Angel (2019)	C
sensory triggers, such as a tucked-in shirt	Lombardi (2016)	C

Note. A = the personal and emotional cost of one-to-one care; B = intuition and relationship as the primary toolkit; C = systemic and environmental pressure. Quotation marks show participant or author wording.

Stage 2: Descriptive Themes

Codes were grouped by similarity of meaning and by how often they recurred across studies. This produced three descriptive themes, which stay close to the content of the original findings.

Descriptive Theme A: The Personal and Emotional Cost of One-to-One Care

This theme clustered codes that described the psychological demands, emotional responses, and boundary issues inherent in intense, long-term 1:1 support.

Supporting codes: mixed and opposing feelings about the work, including reward alongside guilt and the question "Why am I doing this?" (Kelly, 2020, p. 136); intense relational pressure (an "unhealthy" relationship; Lombardi, 2016); emotional reactions to a child in crisis ("really distraught"; Lombardi, 2016); a "mummy side" to the role (Angel, 2019); and reliance on personal qualities ("calm, understanding, patient"; Angel, 2019).

Descriptive Theme B: Intuition and Relationship as the Primary Toolkit

This theme gathered findings on how LSAs approach daily practice and behaviour management without formal, theory-based training.

Supporting codes: reliance on "intuitive practice" and "personal values" (Elston-Green, 2017); confidence built through knowing the child "very well", after feeling "quite nervous sometimes" at the start (Lombardi, 2016); and improvising how to manage the child on the teacher's behalf (Lombardi, 2016).

Descriptive Theme C: Systemic and Environmental Pressure

This theme focused on the external factors that affect LSAs' confidence and emotional well-being.

Supporting codes: austerity and cuts in education funding as the backdrop to TAs' work (Kelly, 2020); limited training and support (Lombardi, 2016); the "low value placed on talking and reflection" (Elston-Green, 2017); attempts "not to make the SEN stand out" to peers (Angel, 2019); and recognition of environmental and sensory triggers for behaviour (Lombardi, 2016).

This theme provides the context against which the individual responses in Themes A and B should be understood.

Stage 3: Analytical Themes

The descriptive themes were then examined through the three theoretical lenses and related to one another. The aim at this stage was to say something that no single study said on its own. Three analytical themes were developed.

Analytical Theme 1: The Personal Cost of Relational Practice

Across the studies, LSAs managed behaviour mainly through their relationship with the child, and the emotional effort of that relationship was the means by which support was delivered. Staying "calm, understanding, patient" (Angel, 2019) during incidents while privately feeling distress or guilt (Kelly, 2020; Lombardi, 2016) fits Hochschild's (1983) account of emotional labour, particularly surface acting. The familial language in Angel's (2019) study and the risk of an "unhealthy" relationship in Lombardi's (2016) study suggest that some LSAs filled the gap left by formal support with personal commitment. Individually, the studies described either emotion (Kelly, 2020) or practice (Elston-Green, 2017; Lombardi, 2016). Taken together, they suggest that for LSAs the relationship is itself the behaviour strategy, so its emotional cost is part of doing the job rather than a side effect of it.

Analytical Theme 2: Experiential Knowledge as the Core Competence

LSAs' confidence in managing behaviour rested on knowing a particular child "very well" (Lombardi, 2016) and on "intuitive practice" and "personal values" (Elston-Green, 2017). In terms of self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1977), this confidence came almost entirely from mastery experience with one child, with little contribution from training or from observing others. The synthesis adds an interpretation that the individual studies did not make: confidence built in this way is tied to the child and may not transfer when the LSA moves to a new pupil or setting. The same pattern appeared in LSAs' understanding of behaviour. They often recognised its likely purpose, such as a sensory trigger (Lombardi, 2016), but used that knowledge to respond in the moment rather than to plan support around the function of the behaviour, as function-based approaches would suggest (Beavers et al., 2013; Carr, 1977).

Analytical Theme 3: Systemic Context and Barriers to Practice

The studies placed LSAs' work within a context of funding cuts (Kelly, 2020), limited training and support (Lombardi, 2016) and little value placed on discussion and reflection (Elston-Green, 2017). The synthesis suggests a specific way in which this context matters: without time for supervision and reflection, LSAs have no setting in which intuitive knowledge about a child can be talked through, linked to a functional understanding and shared with colleagues. The context therefore does more than add pressure; it keeps knowledge personal and the emotional cost private.

Conceptual Model

The three analytical themes are linked, and Figure 2 presents the relationship between them as a conceptual model.

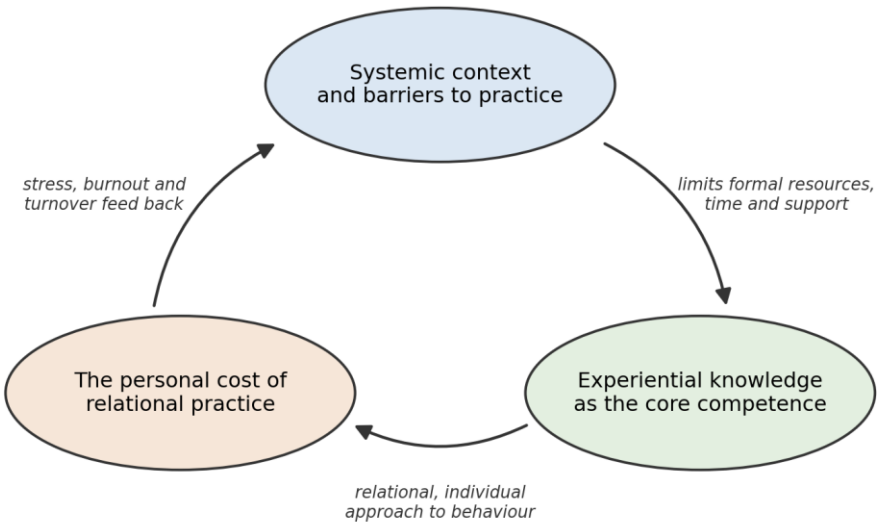


Figure 2. The LSA Experience of Managing Challenging Behaviour: A Conceptual Model

The model proposes the following relationships:

1. The systemic context limits the formal resources, time and professional structures available to LSAs.
2. Without these supports, LSAs rely on experiential knowledge of a particular child, which leads to an individual and relational approach to behaviour.
3. This relational approach, carried out without adequate structures, brings a high personal and emotional cost, which may in turn feed back into the systemic context through stress, burnout and staff turnover.

The model is offered as one way of explaining how the factors identified in the studies relate to one another. It is derived from four studies and should be tested in future research.

Discussion

This synthesis examined how LSAs experience and manage challenging behaviour among pupils with autism and other complex needs. Three linked analytical themes were developed: the personal cost of relational practice, experiential knowledge as the core competence, and systemic context and barriers to practice. Each review question is considered in turn below.

The included studies said less about the types of challenging behaviour than about LSAs' responses to it. Where behaviour was described, it was in terms of distress and escalation, such as a child who was "really distraught" (Lombardi, 2016), behaviour linked to SEMH needs (Angel, 2019) and sensory triggers (Lombardi, 2016). None of the studies classified behaviour systematically, and none involved pupils with cerebral palsy. The answer to the first review question is therefore limited: LSAs described behaviour mainly through its emotional impact. This contrasts with quantitative studies in special schools, which record aggression, self-injury and stereotyped behaviour (Nicholls et al., 2020, 2023), and suggests that future qualitative studies could ask LSAs more directly about the forms and functions of the behaviour they meet.

The psychological factors identified in answer to the second question centred on emotional labour. LSAs managed their own feelings to stay calm during incidents (Angel, 2019) while holding mixed and opposing feelings about the work (Kelly, 2020). Leggett and Ostashchenko (2026), whose study was not part of the synthesis, reported a very similar pattern among teaching assistants in a special school, with themes of "working without a safety net" and "living behind the mask" (p. 146). The close match between their findings and the present themes gives some support to the interpretation offered here. Gordon et al. (2026) found that school staff exposed to pupils' distress reported some symptoms consistent with secondary traumatic stress, although not all criteria for clinical levels were met. The present findings suggest that LSAs may face a similar risk, but the included studies did not measure it, so this remains a question for further research rather than a conclusion.

In answer to the third question, the approaches LSAs reported were mainly relational and responsive: building a close relationship with the child, keeping calm, calming situations down and making support less visible to peers (Angel, 2019; Lombardi, 2016). LSAs often showed an intuitive grasp of why a behaviour occurred, but this was seldom turned into planned, function-based support of the kind PBS describes (Elston-Green, 2017). This gap appears less a failing of individual LSAs than a likely result of how their confidence is built (Analytical Theme 2) and of the lack of time to share and reflect (Analytical Theme 3). Function-based approaches are not the only valid way to support pupils (Woodcock & Blackwell, 2020), but PBS appears to work best when staff training is combined with organisational support (Konstantinidou et al., 2023), which is the element most clearly missing from the LSAs' accounts.

The environmental factors identified under the second question were shaped by the wider system. Funding pressures (Kelly, 2020), limited training (Greenway & Edwards, 2021; Lombardi, 2016), uncertain roles (Abbott et al., 2011; Blatchford et al., 2012) and a low value placed on reflection (Elston-Green, 2017) together left LSAs to manage complex situations largely alone. In the conceptual model, this context sits at the start of a cycle that keeps knowledge personal and the emotional cost private.

Several implications follow for the fourth question. Training that links LSAs' intuitive knowledge to a functional understanding of behaviour, regular reflective supervision, and protected time for joint planning with teachers each address a different part of the cycle described in the model. The findings

suggest that an approach to inclusion that relies heavily on LSAs' personal commitment may be difficult to sustain, but this conclusion rests on four small studies and needs testing in larger and more varied samples.

Limitations

This synthesis has several limitations. First, it rests on four studies, sampled purposively rather than exhaustively, and screening, appraisal and coding were carried out by a single reviewer; relevant studies may have been missed, and the interpretation reflects one person's view. Second, all four studies were theses, which were examined by their institutions but did not pass through journal peer review. Third, all were set in mainstream schools, at least three of them in the UK, so the findings may not apply to special schools or to other countries. Leggett and Ostashchenko's (2026) special school study suggests similar themes but was not coded. Fourth, none of the studies involved pupils with cerebral palsy, and one (Kelly, 2020) did not focus on challenging behaviour. Finally, the synthesis worked from findings as reported by the original authors, so its interpretations are at one remove from the participants themselves.

Conclusion

This synthesis brought together four qualitative studies of LSAs' experiences of managing challenging behaviour among pupils with autism and other complex needs. Three linked analytical themes were developed: the personal cost of relational practice, experiential knowledge as the core competence, and systemic context and barriers to practice.

In answer to the review questions, LSAs described challenging behaviour mainly through its emotional impact rather than its form; they managed it through close relationships, personal qualities and intuition; and their practice was shaped by emotional labour, by confidence tied to particular children, and by a context with little time for supervision or reflection. Their strategies often showed an intuitive grasp of why behaviour occurred, but this understanding was seldom used to plan function-based support.

The main contribution of the synthesis is to suggest how these factors may connect. The relationship with the child appears to be both the LSA's main tool and the main source of strain, and the absence of reflective space keeps the knowledge gained through that relationship personal. Strengths were also evident, including LSAs' commitment, their relational skill and their sensitivity to pupils' needs.

Because the findings rest on four studies, they should be treated as tentative. They suggest that schools may support both LSAs and pupils by linking training to LSAs' existing knowledge, offering reflective supervision and protecting time for joint planning.

Recommendations

The following suggestions arise from the synthesis. They are directed at school leaders, local authorities and researchers, and are offered tentatively given the small evidence base.

Professional Development for LSAs Supporting Pupils with Complex Needs

LSAs' practice relies heavily on experience and intuition (Elston-Green, 2017; Lombardi, 2016). School leaders and local authorities could consider funded professional development in function-based approaches and PBS for LSAs who support pupils with complex needs. Such training would be most useful if it built on LSAs' existing knowledge of individual children, helping them link what they already notice about a child's behaviour to its likely function.

Clearer Roles and Recognition

Uncertainty about the LSA role was a recurring concern (Abbott et al., 2011; Lombardi, 2016). School leaders could clarify LSAs' responsibilities, distinguishing between teaching support, administrative tasks and behaviour support. Policy makers may also wish to consider whether a recognised career pathway for LSAs who specialise in complex needs and challenging behaviour, with matching training and pay, would help retention.

Reflective Supervision and Emotional Support

Given the emotional demands described in all four studies, schools could provide regular individual or group reflective supervision for LSAs, led by a suitably trained professional such as an educational psychologist, with protected non-contact time to attend. This would also respond to the low value placed on talking and reflection reported by Elston-Green (2017) and to the call for structured debriefs made by Leggett and Ostashchenko (2026).

Joint Planning between LSAs, Teachers and SENCOs

School leaders could set aside regular time for LSAs, class teachers and special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) to plan together, review behaviour records and agree consistent support plans. Shared planning would help move knowledge of a child from one LSA to the wider team.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could test whether reflective supervision and function-based training improve LSA well-being and reduce the frequency and intensity of challenging behaviour, using quantitative or mixed-methods designs. Qualitative studies could examine LSAs' experiences in special schools and outside the UK, the experiences of LSAs supporting pupils with cerebral palsy, and pupils' own views of their one-to-one support. Studies could also ask LSAs directly about the forms and functions of the behaviour they meet, which the included studies seldom addressed.

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