

# Exploring the Role of the Learning Support Assistant: A Case Study of an English Special School

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Educational Doctorate

Institute of Education  
University of Reading

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**May 2019**

# Abstract

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While the number of Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) in schools continues to rise, ambiguities persist in relation to their role and function within the teaching profession. Although there has been previous research exploring the nature and purpose of LSAs in mainstream schools, very little is known about LSAs within the context of special schools. This is surprising, especially given the high ratio of LSAs to teachers in such schools and how important they are perceived to be in supporting children's learning and development. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to address this knowledge gap and explore how the role of the LSA is perceived and experienced within a UK special school.

This is a qualitative case study, framed within the interpretivist paradigm. Through questionnaires (n=11), interviews (n=11) and documentary analysis, the perspectives and experiences of LSAs, teachers and senior leaders were explored in relation to the three inter-related concepts of professional identity, continuing professional development, and organisational culture. These data were analysed using established thematic analysis techniques.

The findings from this research suggest that there are intricate relationships at play between the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders within the case study school. While LSAs felt that they could begin to develop their professional identities through initial training and clearly articulated roles and responsibilities, the perceived place in which they viewed themselves within the school's organisational culture poses challenges in the ongoing relationships between senior leaders and the LSAs, creating complex sub-cultures within the institution and offering challenges for on-going CPD provision. In highlighting key implications for professional practice and enabling middle and senior leaders to reflect upon their current approach to on-going CPD opportunities for LSAs, it is claimed that the findings of this study offer a significant contribution to education knowledge.

## Statement of Original Authorship

Student ID: XV016804

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Module Title and Number: EdD – Part B Thesis

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Assignment Title: Exploring the Role of the Learning Support Assistant: A Case Study of an English Special school

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# Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank the following people for their support throughout this research without many of whom this study would not have been possible – this includes the school with which I carried out this case study, the belief from the Head Teacher and sincere appreciation to all the participants who took part in the questionnaires and interviews, generously offering their time and sharing their personal experiences and professional insight.

I shall always be grateful for the determined support from my supervisors Dr. Alan Floyd and Dr. Cathy Tissot. They encouraged me to continue on this journey, offering their wise experience and expert knowledge and guiding me throughout each stage.

To my wonderful David whose patience and inspiration through the highs and the lows of this journey has led me to believe more in myself and achieve more than I thought I could. And not forgetting my family and friends who have often greeted me with “How’s the thesis going?” to which I can finally smile and proudly say “Done!”

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# Chapter One – Introduction

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## 1.1 Introduction

While the number of Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) in schools continues to rise (Veck, 2009), ambiguities persist in relation to their role and function within the teaching profession. Although there has been previous research exploring the nature and purpose of LSAs in mainstream schools, very little is known about LSAs within the context of special schools (Mistry, Burton and Brundrett, 2004). This is surprising, especially given the high ratio of LSAs to teachers in such schools (DfE, 2010) and how important they are perceived to be in supporting children's learning and development (Mistry, et al., 2004). The purpose of this doctoral study, therefore, is to address this knowledge gap and explore how the role of the LSA is perceived and experienced within a UK special school.

Through investigating the role of LSAs in a special school, a deeper understanding of the impact that their role has on the school will accrue, as well as what the perception of their professional status in the organisational culture of the school is. This study aims to gain a better understanding of the role that LSAs have in this case study school in relation to supporting the teacher including the position of the LSAs within the organisational culture and how the LSAs have been able to develop their own professional identities.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with a brief overview of the thesis, including the justification for this topic as well as to detail the researcher's personal interest in this field of research. The problem that is explored will be identified, alongside the specific research questions that will be addressed. In addition, a brief overview of the study's conceptual framework and methodology will be presented. The origins of the study will also be shared in this chapter, along with a brief introduction to the context of the case study school. Finally, the structure of the thesis will be highlighted.

## 1.2 Identifying the problem

Over the last twenty years the number of LSAs working in education settings in England (this includes nursery, primary and secondary schools, special school and pupil referral units) has risen from 61, 600 in 1997 to over 152,000 in 2006 (DfES, 2006; Veck, 2009). More recently in November 2012 it was recorded that there were 232,000 LSAs working in such schools (Adams and Burn-Murdoch, 2013). This demonstrates a significant increase which will undeniably have impacted upon the structure and organisational culture of schools.

The rise in numbers of LSAs working in England rose during the Labour administration of Tony Blair. Initially, this rise in numbers in LSAs in schools was brought about due to an increase in investment of public money into education, which can be traced back to the Plowden Report in 1967 (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967) and the Warnock Report in 1978 (Warnock, 1978). The Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967) examined the sociology of education looking closely at the children who were failing, in particular focusing on children in an environment that was described as being “unconducive” and therefore preventing the children from reaching their potential. Following this, social policy began to take into account the role that education can play in mediating inequalities in society. The introduction of the ‘eleven plus’ examinations and Grammar schools post World War Two reflected social divisions and child poverty. The Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978) built on the Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967) which eventually led to the SEN Code of Practice which was introduced in 1994 (DfE). The Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978) altered the way children with Special Educational Needs and children with learning difficulties were supported, changing practice in mainstream and special schools. Such change that was outlined in The Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978) included changes in the terms used to describe children; handbooks in local authorities detailing the provision for pupils with SEN was to be kept up-to-date; designated teachers to have responsibility for the pupils; children with SEN to be provided with support; and developments to the curriculum that was being provided.

These changes really began to take effect with the introduction of the SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) which created opportunities for pupils with learning difficulties to be provided with a bespoke provision. In turn this led to the increase in numbers of LSAs working in schools as a drive to include pupils with SEN in mainstream schools, as well as implications from policies that reshaped the school workforce. Inclusion acted as a driving force from the Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) with the introduction of interventions and therapies with numbers of pupils being educated in special schools in England decreasing by 2000 (Webster, Russell and Blatchford, 2016). Data released by the Government showed that in 2003 16.6 per cent of pupils with SEN were educated in mainstream schools, increasing to 20.7 percent in 2010; it is unsurprising therefore, that numbers of LSAs has increased.

Examining workload, however, since the mid-1990s, shows an increase in pressure and workload affecting the retention and recruitment of teachers (Webster, et al., 2016). The remodelling of the schools' workforce with the support of LSAs through *The National Agreement: Raising Standards and Tackling Workload* (DfE, 2003) was signed by the government and all but one teachers' union and acted as a starting point to tackle teachers' workload. The aim of this was to enable teachers to raise teaching standards through the employment and deployment of LSAs.

As a consequence of this, two assumptions were made of the role of LSAs. Firstly, the support of LSAs leads to positive outcomes and attainment for pupils who are considered to be low attaining; and that LSAs have a positive effect on teacher work load. Therefore, the role of the LSA has changed over this relatively short period of time. This has been reflected in a study that evaluated the use of LSAs in a primary school (Mistry, et al., 2004). With a change in legislation (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, DfES, 2001) whereby children with special educational needs (SEN) are to be supported by LSAs that are educational professionals in their own right, the role of the LSA needs to be more closely examined to ensure this professional role is being supported by the school.

For example, if LSAs are to be viewed as professionals then we must consider how they develop their professional identity and what opportunities they are presented with for themselves to feel part of a profession. When thinking about the role of teachers and their professional identity development, is it possible to transpose this model to LSAs? Or would there be problems with this approach? What unique opportunities and challenges exist for LSAs in relation to their professional development and how might this knowledge help schools ensure that this crucial group are properly supported to carry out their roles to the best of their ability?

At this stage it is worth exploring the role and purpose of LSAs in special schools specifically. Since the changes in legislation from the 1970 Education Act (Legislation.gov.uk) where children with special educational needs were previously categorised as 'uneducable', perspectives altered along with the law which ensured that all children were educated. Together with the 1981 Education Act (Legislation.gov.uk) and the Warnock Report (Warnock, 1978) pupils with SEN had opportunities to be educated in mainstream settings. Guidance issued by the Department of Education outlined how numbers of LSAs in special schools are derived from an assessment of the staff time that is needed to meet and fulfil the educational needs of a child based upon their 'Statement of SEN' (DfE, 1994). The 'Statement of SEN' has recently been reviewed and children are now issued with Educational Health Care Plans.

Developments continued with new rights, with the SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 1994) which was first issued in 1994 reinforcing the education of SEN children. This was updated in 2001 and alongside the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (DfES) and the Every Child Matters: Change for Children (DfE, 2004) document inclusion and integration as terms were used more widely in education. With changes to legislation, the provision for children with SEN adapted in line with this and the role of LSA evolved in both mainstream and special schools. The role and purpose of LSAs in special schools is to work alongside the teachers and pupils, specifically supporting individual pupils or groups of pupils with learning difficulties, enabling them to be educated (Lacey, 2001). Often LSAs working in special schools will work with pupils with severe

learning difficulties (SLD) or those with profound impairments as well as sensory or motor impairments (PMLD) (Lacey, 2001).

Given that confusion still remains amongst colleagues, parents, other professionals and researchers with the continued inconsistent use of the terms “learning support assistant”, “teacher aides”, “teaching assistant”, “special needs assistant” and “paraprofessionals”, for example (Butt and Lowe, 2012), it is difficult to establish how it would be possible for them to develop a sense of professional identity. Further, this discrepancy with the title of their role draws upon a mixed understanding of the role and responsibilities from both themselves as well as how the LSAs are perceived by others; including colleagues, parents and other professionals such as psychologists and therapists (Tucker, 2009). The impact that this has upon the assistants can affect how they view themselves, for example if they are viewed as ‘helpers’ by parents then they are likely to see themselves as helpers, and not give themselves the professional status they should hold. For the purposes of this study, they will be referred to as “Learning Support Assistants” (LSAs).

The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff Study (DISS-Study) (Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin, Russell, Webster and Rubie-Davies, 2008) carried out over a five year period from 2003 – 2009, examined the deployment of support staff and the impact they have. This research was highlighted as a landmark study by the British Educational Research Association (UCL, 2018) as a result of it being the first longitudinal study that was able to analyse the impact learning support assistants have on pupils’ learning. Whilst several key publications have been produced as a result of the study, pivotal findings from Strand 2 of the study revealed the vast range of tasks that support staff carry out throughout the day.

Key findings from the DISS-Study include the support LSAs give to teachers, and the curriculum. Tasks for the LSAs also entails direct learning support for the pupils, and direct pastoral support for the pupils; included in this is also any indirect support provided for the pupils and administrative or organisational support for the school itself (Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin, Russell and Webster, 2009)

Further, the study (Blatchford, et al., 2009) analysed its findings to explore the impact the support staff have on key aspects of teachers and on teaching; including the pupils. The outcomes showed that overall the presence of LSAs was not beneficial to pupils with regard to pupil engagement, on pupil behaviour and on learning. However, with regard to supporting teachers, it was felt that the impact of LSAs allowed for more teaching and reduced the stress and workload for teaching staff (Blatchford, et al., 2008).

These results offer insight into the wide range of tasks and expectations put upon LSAs, which impacts on their role alongside the complexities related to their position within the learning environment. In many ways, the role of the LSA has been heavily scrutinised as an outcome of the increase in the number of them working in schools across England and the vague understanding of the definition of the LSA role (Veck, 2009). In this paper, Veck outlines the way in which LSAs have been judged in their role with a focus on the lack of training and professional development; and claims that LSAs are often given “sole responsibility for the education of vulnerable and ‘challenging’” pupils (pg 42). In many examples, LSAs were working with the pupils outside of the classroom away from the main teaching environment. Often, therefore, without the teaching experience and guidance of the classroom teacher.

Translating this to the role of the LSA in a special school, the questions that arise are: what do LSAs do and what skills do they possess? What are the development needs of LSAs? To answer these questions we need to establish the LSA role profile and the training opportunities that they are presented with, including how these opportunities compare and differ to those of teachers and how these roles are perceived by the people that they work most closely with, for example teachers and senior leaders.

### **1.3 Aims and Research Questions**

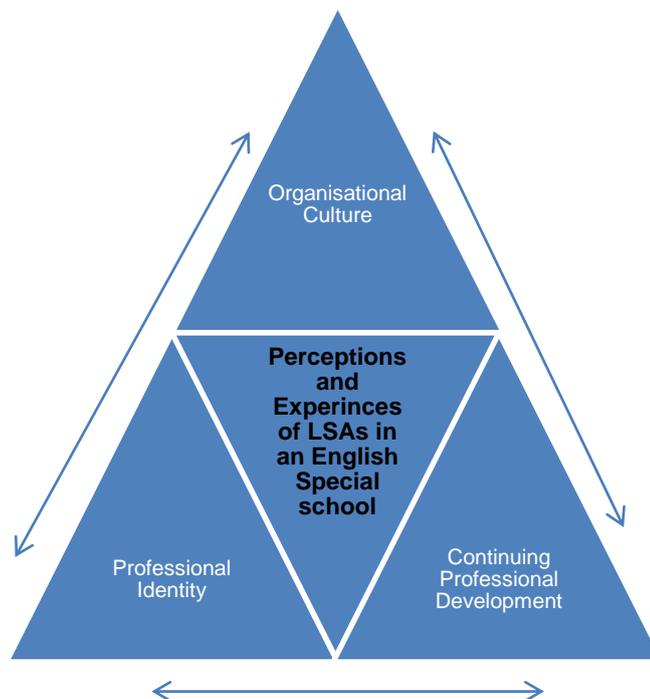
The purpose of this study is to explore how the role of the LSA is perceived and experienced within a UK special school. The main research question is: “What are the perceptions and experiences of LSAs in a special school in England and how are they perceived by teachers and senior staff?” The sub questions posed to address this question are:

- Q1. How do LSAs perceive their role and their professional identities within an English special school?
- Q2. How do the teachers and senior staff perceive the role of the LSA in the school?
- Q3. How do LSAs perceive and experience CPD within the school and what are their development needs?
- Q4. To what extent is a shared vision, or ethos, promoted within the school to develop a collaborative organisational culture?

### 1.4 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the three inter-related concepts of professional identities, continuing professional development (CPD), and organisational culture. This framework will be fully developed in Chapter Two, but a brief overview is given here.

An overview of the conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.1 to demonstrate how these concepts intertwine with a particular focus on the group of LSAs working in the school.



**Figure 1.1: The Conceptual Framework of the Study**

These three key concepts are intertwined, for example, the professional identity of an individual is defined by their continuing professional development opportunities. Their experiences of CPD is determined by the organisational culture and the priority for the setting to embrace professionalism and therefore plays a role in the ability for individuals to develop professional identities.

The idea that an individual has a professional identity is inherent within the definition of the term “professional” and what a profession is. Typical characteristics of a profession have been summarised by Eaude (2011) as having a mastery of knowledge acquired through training; carrying out tasks valuable to society; prioritising the clients welfare; pertaining to autonomy; and having a code of ethics. Whilst definitions of a professional identity vary, there are agreed factors such as regulated standards; expectations; and the perception of professional attributes that play a role in shaping a professional identity (Murray, 2013).

Further, understood until the mid-1990s, continuing professional development was often seen as a voluntary commitment to those with ambition (Craft, 2000). A shift in culture, however, led to a change in attitude, with a particular focus on the introduction of the Professional Standards for Teachers in 2007. The current Teachers’ Standards have been implemented in schools since September 2007 and apply to trainees working towards QTS (Qualified Teacher Status); newly qualified teachers (NQT) and teachers working in maintained schools including special schools (DfE, 2011).

Organisational culture refers to the shared belief, understanding, interaction and development of meaningful relationships within the cultural norms of being part of a community (Stoll, 2007). This includes the idea of collaboration, interpersonal caring and mutual support. A review of the literature and critical analysis of the concepts in relation to this framework will be examined more closely in Chapter 2.

## **1.5 Methodology**

To address the above research questions, the researcher undertook a qualitative case study, framed within the interpretivist paradigm. Through questionnaires (n=11), interviews (n=11) and documentary analysis, the perspectives and experiences of LSAs, teachers and senior leaders were explored in relation to the three inter-related concepts of professional identity, continuing professional development, and organisational culture. These data were analysed using established thematic analysis techniques. Careful consideration of the study's methodology, data collection tools, and research process will be given in Chapter 3.

## **1.6 Thesis in context – personal reflection**

By putting this thesis in context, I aim to share my personal reflections and reasons for undertaking this study. I feel this is particularly relevant as it will allow the reader to have an understanding of my positionality as a researcher carrying out a study within the interpretivist paradigm.

As someone who has always been very aware of how you fit into a group of people the idea of examining more closely the roles and relationships of others in a group has been intriguing. Whether it is family, friends or colleagues, how and why perceptions of a group differ, whether from an insider's or an outsider's point of view has always fascinated me. My various roles as a class teacher leading a team of LSAs and as a teacher working alongside colleagues gives some insight here. If we add to this the view of the LSAs and members of SLT, you can start to get a real sense of how one situation can be perceived very differently through looking at different perspectives and points of view.

I began my teaching career in a local special school not long out of university and recently back from a trip teaching English in schools in South India and Sri Lanka. As a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) the expectations of the role I was starting, and the person I thought I was quickly changed!

I vividly recall my first day in the classroom staring hopefully at the three highly experienced Learning Support Assistants and wondering what they must think of me. Who was I to come in and tell them what to do? They had been part of the school team for many years and acquired a skillset I could only dream of. Starting in the position in January didn't help either, as they had not only established routines but also their own personal roles within the team. Then I came along.

This was my first experience in my very own classroom leading a team of people I didn't know and being expected to meet all of the Professional Standards (TDA, 2007) as they were in 2007, and, of course, to actually teach. It was time to admit that I didn't really know what I was doing and so began an ongoing practical lesson in the long-established importance of working as part of a team to provide good teaching and learning experiences for the children in my class.

What I learnt in this first week of teaching has stayed with me throughout my career to date. Mutual respect for the children, but also between the teacher and the LSAs, is fundamental to positive working relationships; further, knowing your strengths and weaknesses and those of your team and regularly reflecting on how you work together is also key. The importance of developing a sense of trust between the team and remembering the purpose of our role, that we are there for the children and sometimes that means putting our own needs aside for them, has also stayed with me. Keeping these lessons in mind throughout my career has been incredibly valuable in enabling me to develop professionally.

During my first few years of teaching, the culture of the school promoted the notion of staff working collaboratively, with the ethos being that the school represented a community of individuals working together towards the same goal. This study is important to me because during the seven-and-a-half-years I worked at this first school I was able to see a significant change in the school's organisational culture. This included a substantial change in the morale and professional status of the staff working in the school. Whether this was for the better or worse is to be determined by the individual; arguably from the perspective of the Government and Ofsted Inspectors this change has had a hugely positive impact upon the school. However, for individual staff, such change has had a mixed reception.

The change in question occurred naturally through the promotion of an assistant head teacher to head teacher ten years ago. In many respects, this has had a positive impact on the running of the school with a particular focus on developing a more professional culture. This has led to a change in the awareness of behaviour and the impact of how people behave in a professional environment. Whilst many of the staff within the school have embraced and supported the change, there has been some entrenched reluctance to accept the change.

The focus of this change was two-fold. On the one hand, change was driven by the head teacher's ethos and values in leading the school to a greater sense of professionalism and working towards developing a professional culture; but also as a natural consequence of the changing goalposts set out by the Government and Ofsted inspection criteria. Thus, the idea for this thesis began to evolve and take shape.

Although, I have since left this school and moved to a different special school, my interest in organisational culture has only expanded. New experiences have allowed me to recognise similarities in the structure of these special schools, with both having a focus on the staff and the role they play in the successful functioning of the school. A huge difference that I have witnessed between the two schools is the amount of time and focus that has been put on professional development opportunities for both teaching staff and LSAs. This is, in my opinion, a central element of empowering staff to feel capable and successful in their role, to ensure each pupil has valuable teaching and learning opportunities.

Creating a professional community, underpinned by successful leadership should be present within the classroom and evident across the school as a whole. In this regard, the leadership that takes place in the school allows for progression, collaboration and explaining reasons for change, whilst the positive impact it can have encourages others to be a part of that change (Townsend, 2011). In the same way that the organisational culture of the school should empower progression and collaboration, the working relationships of the teacher and the LSAs in the classroom, though on a smaller scale, determine the organisational culture of the class.

This reflection on my role and position in a special school led to my enquiry into the organisational culture of the school and the opportunities that we, as colleagues in the same setting, had to develop our skill set and become outstanding practitioners. From this, my interest in professional identities formed, along with the triangulation of concepts outlined above and thus my study evolved. For me this study acts as a pathway to enabling me to be an outstanding practitioner, as well as an outstanding teacher, as I believe this study will enable me to have an insight into the perceptions that Learning Support Assistants have on the organisational culture and the impact that they have on teaching and learning. LSAs have a crucial part to play in the shaping of a successful special school, and as such I will feel privileged to hold a greater understanding of what it means to be a Learning Support Assistant in a special school.

## **1.7 The Case**

The school with which this research project took place is a community special school, with age ranges of pupils between two and a half and nineteen. The provision includes nursery classes, Early Years, Key Stage 1, 2, 3, 4 and a post-16 sixth form unit. The SEN provision includes pupils with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Severe Learning Difficulty (SLD) and Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD) meaning it covers a broad range of children. In the year 2015-2016, 96 pupils were on roll and 21.6 per cent of pupils were eligible for 'free school meals'.

In the academic year 2008-2009, a new head teacher was appointed to the school, who was promoted in house from the role of assistant head. Since then, the deputy head has retired and the assistant head, who took on the role in replacement of the head teacher when they moved into their new role, has also retired. As a result, the school has seen significant changes to the Senior Leadership Team in the last 10 years. There have also been changes within the teaching staff due to progression to new roles in different schools (two teachers), alongside the retirement of three teachers during this time. There has been some movement of LSAs within the school through both internal promotion and some moving elsewhere to other settings. On average there are between 30 to 35 LSAs working in the school with this figure fluctuating through the school year if an LSA

leaves before SLT are able to appoint new LSAs to fill the role. Whilst numbers remain consistent, the individual LSAs have changed over time.

Alongside these changes to staffing, particularly within the Senior Leadership Team, policy changes have been implemented with regard to developing the assessment tool used throughout the school to measure pupil progress. Whilst the decision to implement this change was made by senior leaders, it is the teaching staff and LSAs that have been most affected by the change through their day to day working with the pupils. Teachers were informed about the imminent changes being made to the assessment process in the school and were required to undergo training to ensure they were able to use the new assessment tool. Whilst the impact of this new strategy impacts upon the teaching staff in terms of staff deployment, planning and assessment, it should be noted that these changes affect the LSAs too, particularly given the expectations for them to be confident in using the assessment tool, and subsequent changes to how the teacher utilises the LSAs within the classroom in relation to student learning and assessment. The Case Study school will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

## **1.8 Significance and Outcomes**

The current gap in knowledge lies in knowing if there is appropriate support for LSAs working in a special school to develop professional identities through experience and training opportunities (Murray, 2013; Hoyle and John, 1995). At the present time much of the research that has taken place around the role of LSAs has been within mainstream settings where the roles and responsibilities of the LSAs can differ considerably to that of an LSA working in a special school (Veck, 2009). Moreover, there can be more than 20 LSAs working in a special school compared to primary schools where there may only be one or two LSAs working across the whole school (Mistry, et al., 2004).

The possible outcomes of this study therefore include having a much deeper understanding of the role and responsibility of LSAs working in a special school and appreciating the position they have within the culture of the school. This involves scrutinising the process and training they have undergone from starting

in their role, and the way in which the LSAs are perceived by others as professionals in education. While not claiming to be generalisable, it is hoped that the successful practice, alongside any limitations to the way the LSAs in the special school are able to develop professional identities and the training that takes place, has the potential to be extended to people working in similar contexts. It could act as an example of practice to be compared with other special schools to support them in developing a model for CPD and support LSAs in their own professional identities. Thus, this thesis aims to act as a stepping-stone in offering its findings to benefit professional practice and have implications for future policy development in the sector. For example, by identifying training and development needs for LSAs, it is hoped that this research will provide new professional knowledge to help this group of professionals, which in turn will impact positively on the pupils that they work with.

## **1.9 Overview of thesis**

This thesis is organised over seven chapters. Chapter 1 has outlined the key areas for focus for this thesis, drawing the reader into the study. Chapter 2 is a review of current literature where the three key concepts have been critically analysed drawing upon their place within the special school, highlighting current short-comings in the literature pertaining to this case study. Chapter 3 justifies the chosen research methods underpinning the interpretivist paradigm, carefully considering associated ethical implications of this case study. Chapters 4 and 5 analyse the data from the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders, linking themes that are discussed in Chapter 6 relating to the three key concepts of this study. This thesis concludes with Chapter 7, which summarises this case study outlining the original contribution to knowledge, as well as reflections and implications of this study.

## **1.10 Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on introducing the thesis by identifying the problem and highlighting the main aims to be achieved through focused research questions

underpinned by the key concepts of organisational culture, professional development and professional identities.

The conceptual framework and methods were briefly outlined, the context of the study has been explained demonstrating personal reflections from myself and identifying why this study is important. This acts as a starting point to understanding the chosen key concepts for the study, which will now be detailed in Chapter 2.

# Chapter Two – Literature Review

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## 2.1 Introduction

This thesis explores the perceptions and experiences of Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) in a special school in England. Its purpose is to understand the perspective of the LSAs in relation to their professional identities, the continuing professional development opportunities (CPD) that are presented to them and the organisational culture of the school. This chapter aims to review the literature surrounding these three key concepts to construct the conceptual framework for this study. The research question underpinning this study is as follows:

“What are the perceptions and experiences of LSAs in a special school in England and how are they perceived by teachers and senior staff?”

The complex relationships between the key concepts of professional identities, CPD and organisational culture are examined below to explore the intricate nature of their relationship.

## 2.2 Conceptual Framework

The concepts of professional identity, CPD, and the organisational culture of a school are closely interlinked and central to our understanding of the problem under investigation. For example, as professionals, teachers are expected to engage in a range of CPD experiences during their career in order to keep abreast of new developments in the field and to continue to develop as they take on different roles within their schools (Craft, 2000). Teachers' CPD experiences, however, can vary considerably within a school setting, with such variances often down to the prevailing culture of the organisation as espoused and enacted by the school leadership team (Stevenson, Hedberg, O'Sullivan and Howe, 2016).

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in the number of LSAs that are employed in schools (Edmond and Price, 2009). A change in the roles and expectations of LSAs in schools has led to many tasks traditionally undertaken

by teachers being performed by LSAs (Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, Martin and Russell, 2010). This has influenced the training needs and qualifications required of LSAs resulting in changes in the way school budgets are spent to meet these demands with a positive outcome on pupils' academic progress (Farrell, Alborz, Howes and Pearson, 2010). Given this changing landscape, how do LSAs perceive themselves in relation to the teaching profession? How do teachers and leaders in their school perceive LSAs? What are their experiences and perceptions of CPD and how does this compare to teachers' experiences? Further, how does the organisational culture of the working environment affect these experiences? These questions lie at the heart of this thesis.

To develop this framework, it is important to establish first how professionalism has been defined in education and to understand how the role of the teacher as a professional has changed over the last 30 years (Barber, 2005). The publication of the DISS-Study in 2009 was influential in shaping the ways that LSAs were deployed in schools. This five year project examined the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff in Schools (Blatchford et al., 2009) and takes into account how the role of LSA has undergone a considerable transformation from 'helper' to a more defined role. Changes in thinking about how LSAs should be deployed in schools and the role that they have, coincided with expectations of schools set by OFSTED which led to a greater need for CPD opportunities for LSAs.

The CPD opportunities offered to LSAs focus on enabling them to carry out specific tasks in their role. This is led by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and can be facilitated by teachers, therefore, we must consider the position of LSAs within the organisational culture of the school and examine the shared values and ethos underpinning such opportunities (Hopkins, 2007).

Evidence suggesting this area has previously been under-explored is evident from literature searches. Key words in these searches include 'learning support assistants', 'teaching assistants', 'special schools', 'education', 'continuing professional development' and 'professionalism'. Reading journal papers and other published work such as scholarly articles highlighted the research that has taken place examining the role of LSAs in both primary and secondary schools

in England, the UK and internationally. Examples include Mulvey (2013) “How to be a good professional: existentialist continuing professional development” and Lacey (2001) “The role of learning support assistants in the inclusive learning of pupils with severe and profound learning difficulties”. Whilst these papers touched upon insights into the role of the LSA, professional identities and CPD, the searches did not reveal any extant studies specifically focused on the culture and professionalism of LSAs in special schools from the perspective of LSAs. Papers yielded from this search are critiqued throughout this literature review.

Close examination of these key terms through a critique of the literature will demonstrate how these key concepts link together and show how the research questions for this study were posed in order to respond to the current gaps in the literature.

## **2.3 Professional Identity**

The purpose of this section is to review the literature and examine the concept of professional identity with particular reference to Learning Support Assistants.

### **2.3.1 Teaching as a Profession**

Exploring the idea of teaching as a profession and taking into account the way in which teachers are perceived as professionals in the current climate acts as a useful starting point in exploring this concept (Hanlon, 1998; Whitty, 2006). Derived from the Latin ‘to profess’, the etymology of the term ‘profession’ means a person who is an expert in their field (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010). According to the Professional Standards Councils (2017), a profession can be defined as a group of individuals possessing special knowledge and skills who adhere to ethical standards (2017). Increasing government involvement in the profession over the last three decades, reflected in the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 and ‘Teacher Competences’ in England in 1992, has acted as a benchmark against which all teachers are assessed. Although this enabled the Government to monitor teaching standards across schools more closely, the way in which teachers perceived their role and viewed their profession changed, as they felt that they had less autonomy in determining what and how they can teach as

teacher autonomy mainly focuses on the experience of 'freedom' on professional practice (Mausethagen and Molstad, 2015). It is argued that the shift towards greater teacher accountability and placing more restrictions on curriculum content has led to the standardization of teaching practice and therefore a reduction in teacher autonomy (Mausethagen and Molstad, 2015). But how do LSAs fit in to this complex picture? According to Groom (2006), the "identification of the importance of teaching assistants... [and]... of the professional role" (pg 200) that LSAs undertake is paramount and drives the development and progression for LSAs to continually meet the needs of supporting the teacher in teaching and learning (DfES, 2005). However, LSAs have been previously referred to as 'paraprofessionals' - defined as a person who is not a licensed professional, but who performs duties alongside a professional supporting them in their role (Mauro, 2017). This is a useful term when considering the role of LSA and their professional status, or lack thereof (Kubiak and Sandberg, 2011). This thesis aims to explore these notions by examining the perceptions of LSAs of their professional identity, a concept that is explored further in the next section.

### **2.3.2 Professional Identity**

Akkerman and Meijer (2011) proposed that a professional identity refers to an individual's perception of themselves, taking into account both the personal and professional side of that person. It has also been argued that professional identities are complex, multiple and ever changing, and are socially constructed through various experiences and perceptions (Floyd and Morrison, 2014).

Whilst dated, Goffman's 'Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life' is still one of the most influential sociological theories of identity formation, maintenance and change in the Twentieth Century. An analogy illustrated by Goffman (1959) unpicks the way identities are socially constructed, describing how an individual is able to control the impression others receive of a situation and the 'character' that is presented between people within different contexts. Goffman (1959) believed that we 'act' and present ourselves in a particular manner. His opinion is such that the way in which we present ourselves is dependent on the setting and situation with which our interactions with the social world take place and can bear significance to the way we interact with others. Goffman (1959) elaborated

that whilst we cannot determine how others perceive these interactions, individuals can control the image they portray. This suggests that for LSAs the way in which they portray themselves as professionals may or may not be perceived by others in the same way they intend.

Similarly, the concept of 'actor', depicted by Berger and Luckman (1966) is a good illustration of identity as it refers to the importance of "consequence of self-experience" (pg 90). Although this theory is also dated, the work of Berger and Luckman supports Goffman's work with both theories having relevance to this study given the nature of the idea that this thesis is based upon individuals' experiences and their subjective perspectives of these experiences. This implies that individuals have the ability to choose how they behave in different situations and environments, basing their decision on who is in the audience.

Whilst a precise definition of professional identity has proven elusive, the following aims to clarify the concept within the context of this study. Beijaard, Meijer and Verloop (2004) and Sutherland and Markauskaite (2012) believe that an identity is formed over time, altering as a result of the influence and experiences of an individual through the acquisition of skills, knowledge, habits and values. In their opinion, an individual can have several identities. In contrast, however, Ibarra (2000) argues that once a professional identity is formed it remains relatively fixed whilst Edmond and Hayler (2013) state that the term professional identity has come to refer to the development of a work identity, and a sense of self that occurs in the early stages of a person's professional practice.

These competing theories suggest how complex the notion of professional identity is and points to the fact that in order to understand these in the context of LSAs, we need to explore a range of individual, situational and cultural factors. A number of studies have compared the development of professional identities of teachers. Chong (2011) explored student teachers developing their professional identities through surveys at three time points. Throughout the study, 304 respondents participated at each time point from entry and exit to the initial teacher program and at the end of their first year as a novice teacher. Chong (2011) found that a professional identity in education is a complex concept that includes the development of a sense of self as a person and as a teacher

and is based upon the theory that identity is a personal and social process. Chong's (2011) study reflects upon the work of Goffman (1959), and Berger and Luckman (1966) whose definitions of identity took into consideration the background and personal biography of an individual. Within this, there are layers, which are formed as part of the process of the construction of identity for an individual, and an individual can fluctuate between these layers as an ongoing process between their personal and professional identity (Kagan, 1992; Weinberger and Shefi, 2012).

A main component of this thesis study is to examine the changing role of LSAs, their perceptions and the way in which others perceive them. Therefore, throughout this thesis, the term professional identity refers to the identity that an individual has at a given point in their career and it is understood to be changeable and personal to the individual based upon their own experiences and skills. This will include the way in which an individual is able to act morally and conduct themselves in a professional manner with shared values and attitudes (Busher and Sarah, 1995; Pitula, 2012).

### **2.3.3 LSA Professional Identities**

Taking into account the way a professional identity is developed, the way in which an LSA is able to develop a professional identity may vary to that of a teacher due to differences in opportunities to undertake training and qualifications (Dew-Hughes, Brayton and Blandford, 1998). A key study carried out by Dew-Hughes, et al., (1998) acknowledged ongoing discrepancies with the role of LSA and the expectations put upon them in their role. This study was carried out following a series of one day professional training for LSAs in secondary schools; it explored the views of 274 non-teaching professionals in secondary schools from sixty-two local authorities through questionnaires. In this study, they attempted to redefine the role and found that many assistants in secondary schools in England were left confused over their job specification and job descriptions including various titles to the role.

Subsequent changes in legislation from the government and the introduction of the National Framework adopted by many local education authorities (LEAs)

across England and Wales (Mistry, et al., 2004) has impacted upon the role LSAs play within mainstream and special schools. In his article, Groom (2006) identified the change and development LSAs had undergone over the previous ten years in their role. He focused on the many different contexts in which LSAs work from primary and secondary schools, to Behaviour Support Teams, highlighting that a third of LSAs employed at that time worked directly with pupils with special educational needs (figures from DfES, 2005). He found that the changes in the LSA role, alongside new thinking towards the role shifting from 'helper' to a more specific role offered clearer direction including working collaboratively to support teachers in the process of teaching and learning. Groom's (2006) findings confirmed the need for more training and further "opportunities for career progression" (pg 203), recognizing the need for LSAs to extend their skills within the new roles. Alongside these studies, key research carried out by the Department for Education to explore the deployment of support staff (referred to as The DISS-Study) was pivotal (Blatchford, et al., 2009). Outcomes of this longitudinal study concluded that literature in the field prior to this offered little in terms of the deployment and impact support staff had in schools (Blatchford, et al., 2009). These findings raised questions with regard to the effective practice in the role, management and training of LSAs in both mainstream and special schools. Outcomes indicated that there was a negative correlation between the amount of support a pupil received, the progress the pupil made and the nature of the support the pupil received (Farrell, Balshaw and Polat, 2000). These displeasing results raised questions about the future role that LSAs had, particularly in mainstream settings (Farrell, Alborz, Howes and Pearson, 2010).

In terms of developing professional identities, this study is likely to have been demoralising for individuals working as LSAs, prompting further consideration by leaders into the deployment of LSAs, including the way LSAs perceive their role and how others perceive them. Reflections on the LSA role as a consequence of the DISS-Study (Blatchford, et al., 2009) have highlighted the need for more formal recognition and the introduction of a new pay scale for LSAs in many Local Education Authorities (LEA).

Much of the previous research in this area focused on the ambiguous role of the support staff with relation to inclusion and support, making it difficult for LSAs to have a sense of belonging and professionalism within their often-confusing role. Since the DISS-Study is the largest study to be carried out in the UK from 2003-2008 it acted as a way for schools to be challenged on the role that classroom assistants have. This, and subsequent legislative changes, marked the beginning of LSAs developing a sense of professionalism in their role (Tucker, 2009). Continued lack of formal qualifications required by LSAs entering the role caused LSAs to remain ambivalent about the way they viewed their role, and the perceptions of others towards their professional identity (Murray, 2013). Most studies of professional identities for LSAs have revealed the shortcomings LSAs are faced with in understanding their role and developing professional identities. A useful study has been carried out in schools in Hong Kong to explore the deployment of English Language assistants across several schools (Trent, 2014). The study aimed to contribute to the way 'identity' is understood by using semi-structured interviews with nine ELTAs in secondary schools. Outcomes from the DISS-Study (Blatchford, Russell and Webster, 2012), revealed that there is a need to redefine the purpose and role of LSAs, acted as a starting point for Trent's (2014) study. He found that challenges remained for support staff with forming professional identities, believing that difficulties in retaining LSAs across the world are due to the lack of opportunities given to develop their identity and status (Trent, 2014).

Studies carried out in Early Years settings have explored the way that practitioners acquired professional identities discovering that internal and external factors played a role, but also that practitioners were empowered by changing the perception of themselves through reflecting upon their own practice (Bleach, 2014; Murray, 2013). Although these studies were carried out in Early Years settings, rather than special schools, there are a number of similarities, including staff having the ability to reflect and evaluate practice to enable an individual to develop a professional identity, as well as being crucial in developing, raising and maintaining high standards of provision for children (Bleach, 2014). This is often achieved through in-house training, a clear job description and performance management opportunities.

Further considerations to be made with regard to the way LSAs are able to perceive themselves as professionals is similar to the impact of personality traits, or trait theory (Hoyle and John, 1995). Trait theory refers to a cyclical model of learning where patterns of thoughts, emotions and behaviour are inherent in individuals (Kolb, 1984). Kolb based his research on the work of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget, and although it is over 30 years old, his findings are comparable to the notion that our experiences, behaviour and perception develop our characteristics and that this process pertains to the way an individual may develop a professional identity.

Traits that are considered by John (2008) to be features of a profession include prioritising the client's welfare; having a code of ethics, or practice; completing tasks that are fundamental to society; and being highly skilled and highly knowledgeable, where such traits have been acquired through training. In terms of a school setting the clients could be the pupils, the parents or the staff (Eaude, 2011). A challenge here, however, is the disadvantage LSAs have in knowing their position within a setting and the limitations in their professional development opportunities, caused by their current lack of career structure.

The previous lack of career structure or national qualifications for LSAs, continues to be a problem of LSAs feeling undervalued (Dew-Hughes, Brayton and Blandford, 1998). Alongside this, a key issue for LSAs in developing their professional identities remains with the previously confusing role profile, or lack of profile, that has led many LSAs to have a mixed perception of their place within the profession and as part of the school culture (Harwood, Klopper, Osanyin and Vanderlee, 2013).

Taking into account factors that have been defined as contributing to an individual establishing a professional identity, insights can be drawn into the potential there is for LSAs to achieve this. Within the context of this study, scrutiny of the perceptions the LSAs have of their role, their own professional identities and the opportunities that they are presented with to achieve this will be examined. Further, the senior leaders and teachers' opinions regarding professional identities of LSAs will be explored to gain understanding of how the LSA role is perceived from the SLT perspective and promoted by the leaders.

This section defined professional identities within the context of a profession; for teachers and LSAs in the ever-changing role that LSAs find they work. Theories have been critiqued and the current gaps in literature highlighted. Key questions have emerged which link to this study:

- How do LSAs perceive their role and their professional identities?
- What aspects of the role do they feel make them a professional?
- How do others perceive the role of the LSA?

## **2.4 Continuing Professional Development**

The purpose of this section is to review the literature and examine the concept of continuing professional development (CPD) with a focus on Learning Support Assistants.

### **2.4.1 What is CPD?**

In its simplest description, continuing professional development (CPD) is based upon teachers moving forward in their knowledge and skills, and can be applied to others working in the education setting (Craft, 2000). Another opinion unpicks CPD as a means to provide access to a variety of learning experiences, encouraging reflection and inclusion in a motivating and valued learning community (Banks and Shelton Mayes, 2001). It has been established that CPD can be characterized in a number of forms including formal, informal and structured learning opportunities (Kennedy, 2011). When embedded through the ethos of the school, this can be achieved amongst all staff members, including LSAs. Bolam (1986) identified a model for CPD that examined the purpose, location, length, method and level of impact of CPD based upon a continuum of need. Although this is now a somewhat dated model, it remains valid within the education sector capturing the essence of CPD that is now long established in schools, and an opinion shared by Fraser, Kennedy, Reid and McKinney (2007). Bolam's (1986) model of CPD serves five main purposes along its continuum and is geared towards whole school needs alongside individual needs. The model is

a good example demonstrating how specific outcomes of professional development opportunities can include making people feel valued, anticipating changes with their work and developing competency (Bradley, 1991). The purpose of this study is to examine how CPD opportunities are presented to LSAs. In order to achieve this, the concept of CPD first needs to be explored in relation to schools.

### **2.4.2 CPD in schools**

With ever-changing expectations and shifting goalposts in schools on how to improve, it is imperative that staff are provided with appropriate training to enable them to meet these expectations. An understanding of the role of CPD in schools lies with an appreciation that a key focus of CPD is being able to support people to develop skills, attitudes and knowledge appropriate to their role, including actively reflecting on practice (Bleach, 2014). The definition of CPD presented by Craft (2000) can be further explored by more closely unpicking the interchangeable terms of professional development, CPD and INSET (In-Service Education Training). These terms cover a range of activities that comprise opportunities that contribute to the learning and development of staff. According to Craft (2000), examples of these activities include courses, job-shadowing and moving forward with knowledge and skills. For LSAs, are these opportunities available? And are they presented with the same CPD as their teacher colleagues, or does this look different?

A compelling theory illustrated by David Berliner (2001), tracks out the journey from novice to expert, that he believes only a small number of teachers are able to achieve. In his model, he discusses the journey made by a teacher as they move through five stages of professional development through their career (Banks and Shelton Mayes, 2001). The stages captured within this model relate to the experience gained from NQT, or 'novice' through to 'advanced beginner' as the teacher gains experience. The journey continues as the teacher becomes more experienced and moves into their third or fourth year to 'competent', onto 'proficient' into the fifth or more year. Evidence suggests that many teachers will remain in this fourth stage, with only a few moving into 'expert' (Berliner, 2001).

In order to achieve this, experience and training to support the teacher to progress is required. For teachers, 'The Teachers' Standards' (TDA, 2007) acts as a basis for initial training with further development through the Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) year. Such government initiatives support the theory laid out by Berliner (2001) as teachers are presented with opportunities to engage with CPD throughout their career. If an LSA enters the role in the same 'novice' stage, questions arise with how the LSA is able to, or if they are able to, progress through the different stages of this model as they become more experienced, and through the CPD opportunities they are presented with. An LSA may have the opportunity to progress through from a Grade 1, to 2 and possibly onto 3 and fluctuate between these stages as part of the process.

Therefore, in schools more specifically, to enable professional development and continued learning throughout a teacher's career, there is an argument to suggest that a teacher "cannot be expected to achieve good practice without proper training and guidance" (Mistry, et al., 2004, pg 127). Claimed by Earley and Bubb (2007), providing initial induction within a school acts as a catalyst to enable staff to carry out their role effectively and a clear training schedule should be identified as an effective way to support teachers and LSAs in their career and meet their role expectations.

In terms of teachers undertaking initial training, another element of CPD is the increasing focus on reflective teaching as a strategy to develop practice. Reflective teaching is promoted through mentoring relationships with colleagues (Harrison, Dymoke and Pell, 2006). As part of their own development, teachers are encouraged to engage in continuing professional development throughout their career, as a way to enable teachers to improve on their skills and develop a greater knowledge base (Banks and Shelton Mayes, 2001).

Research by Fullan (2001), considers the idea of sustainability in schools, taking into account organisations where individuals share in their development of skills and knowledge. Fullan (2001) determines that it is important to develop a professional learning community, with his theory supported by Hopkins (2007). Hopkins (2007) believed that whilst a challenging experience, dedicating time for CPD opportunities for staff to share in, improves practice by enhancing the

knowledge and skills that the staff possess, creating a culture where staff are equipped to meet the teaching and learning needs of the school. This in turn, enables staff to feel part of the professional learning community through the valued shared experience of engaging with professional development opportunities.

It was argued by Miller and Watts (1990) that the nature of the professional training and the sharing of knowledge should ensure that all individuals undertaking professional development have the ability to transfer skills and knowledge obtained during the training into their everyday practice, otherwise the training becomes worthless. It is suggested by Glover and Law (1996) that one of the key outcomes of CPD is to identify the impact the training has upon the school in terms of teaching, learning and management. These two ideas create an understanding that the purpose of CPD is to upskill staff taking into account the development priorities for the school to enable school staff to positively impact upon teaching and learning. The challenge, however, lies when staff do not feel respected, are not able to contribute to their own CPD or when the opportunities presented do not effectively support the teacher to develop their skills and knowledge (Bleach, 2014). This study aims to understand if and how LSAs feel respected in their role, and if they are able to contribute to their own CPD to support their personal and professional development. This is discussed further in the following section.

Through the head teacher taking a lead in promoting good practice of CPD in their school, supported by the Senior Leadership Team, a carefully tailored training package can be designed for the staff to develop teaching and learning experiences for the pupils (Bolam, 1993). The head teacher's shared vision and values in determining the organizational culture of the school is crucial and will be examined further in Section 2.5 of this chapter.

### **2.4.3 CPD for LSAs**

Particularly relevant in special schools, but a consideration for mainstream schools, is the opportunities that LSAs have to engage in continuing professional development. However, according to McConkey and Abbott (2011), it appears

that little research focusing directly on LSAs and their professional development has currently taken place. Unlike teachers, therefore, where a CPD model is established, it is difficult to compare successful models of CPD for LSAs, thus making this study particularly pertinent in the current climate.

Already agreed is the understanding of the importance of CPD for teachers; however, the role of CPD for LSAs is not as straightforward. Whilst 'The Teacher Standards' (TDA, 2007) supports teachers on their journey through their careers, the lack of current structure and progression for LSAs often leads to challenges for leaders to involve LSAs in meaningful CPD (Farrell, et al., 2000). Research carried out in 2004 revealed interesting findings. The study, which was undertaken in a small English Primary school with pupils aged between four and nine years old evaluated LSAs and the CPD opportunities they were presented with (Mistry, et al., 2004). This school has been described as being in a socially deprived area containing a high number of children with SEN that are supported by a small number of LSAs. Mistry, et al., (2004) aimed to determine whether LSAs were clear about their role, investigate LSA concerns surrounding their role and understand how LSAs are deployed. One of the key factors that contributed to the lack of enthusiasm LSAs had towards CPD is challenges in the relationships between the teaching staff and LSAs. Time limitations for the teacher to communicate with the LSAs they are working with about teaching and learning resulted in stressed relationships between staff members. The changing perspective of the Government towards the role the LSA plays in teaching was highlighted as another factor, with the study concluding that there are two strands to the training needs. The first leading to the need for the LSAs to develop the skills required to enable them to carry out additional tasks placed upon them; and training that is required by teachers in managing the LSAs effectively in the classroom (Mistry, et al., 2004).

These interesting findings relate to the research of Hammett and Burton (2005) whose conclusions unpicked the inaccurate job descriptions for LSAs; lack of support provided for them and a lack of pay structure. Alongside the previously inconsistent role profiles for LSAs and varying opinions of their position as professionals, inconsistent opportunities and enthusiasm to engage in professional development can lead to challenges (Hammett and Burton, 2005).

It is not surprising that LSAs felt undervalued and demoralized, with low pay scales reflecting a low perceived status (Hammett and Burton, 2005). Therefore, evidence suggests that the use of incentives, status or an improved pay structure would act as a stimulant for LSAs to enhance their skills and show an interest in CPD opportunities.

In Groom's (2006) research, he stated that the role that LSAs have within schools in improving educational experiences for pupils is crucial. He argues that the LSA role is built upon the wider perspective of the school community supporting pupils in their learning both inside and out of the classroom. It is important for this message to be shared and valued by school leaders. It is believed by Groom (2006) that this will encourage willingness from LSAs to be involved enthusiastically in their own professional development. Stoll (2007) feels it is important for LSAs to be provided with CPD opportunities that are managed effectively within the establishment to ensure that they feel part of the team.

However, the findings from the more recent ground-breaking research of the DISS-Study (Blatchford, et al., 2009) had a significant impact upon the deployment of LSAs with funding implications from the late 1990s suggesting that schools should be providing more training opportunities for LSAs (Mistry, et al., 2004). Although the study revealed discrepancies with the success of the LSA role in many schools across England, and continued to unravel mixed and complex messages for school leaders as well as for LSAs, change has occurred as a result of this study. The research carried out by Blatchford, et al., (2009) drew upon several conclusions, many of which challenged thinking towards the role of LSAs with subsequent studies using the findings from this study to develop opportunities for LSAs across England.

Since the DISS-Study, there has been a shift in the deployment of LSAs, a change in their role profile and professional status resulting in a change in expectation for them in terms of support, monitoring and teaching (Mulvey, 2013). Changes included the need to build in professional development for LSAs, to incorporate how they can support pupils with pedagogy; and to give more time for joint planning and feedback with teachers (Blatchford, et al., 2009). More recent research carried out by Mulvey (2013), proposed that the value of CPD is

enshrined in the concept of professionalism, by its very definition, and enables LSAs to have their own CPD allowing for their involvement in professionalism. To enable LSAs to feel empowered in their role, training specific to their role must be provided, with school leaders recognizing the need for a continuous learning approach, similar to that of teachers (Bolam, 1986; Mulvey, 2013).

Thinking more closely about the role CPD has in schools, and more specifically for LSAs and the way in which they are deployed should be taken into account. The changing role that LSAs play in schools, has a greater focus on supporting individuals and groups of pupils with four key aspects of their role to include support for the pupil; teacher; for the curriculum; and for the school, which have been outlined by the DfES (2000, pg 8). This means that school leaders have a responsibility to ensure that all key staff are equipped in these four areas with the knowledge and skills to enhance teaching and learning. The role for the LSA working in a special school and the CPD opportunities that they may be presented with have attracted little research interest. It is unclear how the four key aspects of the role that the Government has outlined are represented within a special school and the role in which LSAs play in supporting both teachers and pupils with teaching and learning. Changes in role profile, continued discrepancies with pay structure and lack of formal qualifications for LSAs creates an atmosphere of negativity towards CPD, however examples of CPD models and changes in the way LSAs are being deployed in schools is acting as a starting point to modifications (Mulvey, 2013).

Given these changes, and whilst remembering the key role for LSAs is to effectively support pupils, the CPD model that is presented to LSAs in this case study will be examined. Alongside this, the initial training including the aims and purpose of the training that is available for LSAs and teaching staff will be explored. A key aspect of CPD is the responsibility for senior leaders to ensure that staff actively engage with training. Therefore, this will also be considered as part of the study, focusing on how staff perceive the training they receive and how they believe it enables them to be successful in fulfilling their role in the school to support teaching and learning for the pupils. The professional development model present in the case study school will be examined focusing

on the development of clear and accurate job descriptions for LSAs, alongside their desire to progress professionally.

This section explored continuing professional development in developing skills and knowledge with an emphasis on the role it plays in schools, particularly with the changing expectations placed upon school staff. An examination of CPD for LSAs has taken place looking deeper at the opportunities they are presented with in developing their role and gaining experience and expertise in light of the outcomes from the DISS-Study (Blatchford, et al., 2009).

This study aims to examine the result of this change in the role profile and professional status of LSAs working in a special school in England. Through examining current examples of CPD in schools, and the role CPD has for LSAs in a special school, the following key questions have emerged:

- How do LSAs in the school perceive continuing professional development?
- What CPD experiences have LSAs had within the school?
- What are the development needs of LSAs in a special school?
- What opportunities are teachers provided with to develop their leadership and management skills to manage the team of LSAs?

## **2.5 Organisational Culture**

The purpose of this section is to review the literature and examine the concept of organisational culture and the role of Learning Support Assistants within this culture.

### **2.5.1 Organisational cultures**

From a theoretical stance, an organisational culture refers to the functions a group or 'culture' performs to maintain the group or to achieve certain goals, and can include a whole culture, or sub-cultures that may develop within (Westoby, 1988). Lave and Wenger's (1991) idea of a 'community of practice' creates a

deeper understanding of cultures. Lave and Wenger (1991) argued that 'communities of practice' are everywhere and that an individual, at any given time, may be part of several. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), the way in which individuals interact with the world and with each other provide opportunities to learn from these experiences. Based on his previous work, Wenger (1998) continued to examine the assumption that learning is something that individuals do, but rethinking the notion that learning has a beginning and an end. It is believed that within these cultures, or communities there is an area of knowledge that gives individuals a sense of identity that is shared among the members (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Whilst these sources are somewhat dated, a more recent viewpoint of a culture generates a similar belief, including the idea that a culture refers to the importance of people, their interpretations of events and the way in which their experiences influence the group (Alvesson, 2002). This idea of a shared culture has various references within education, including supporting the idea of a professional learning community, whereby the learning refers to that of teachers and LSAs, not pupils. In its simplest form, a professional learning community entails a supportive group of individuals who work collaboratively to reflect on practice to improve pupil learning, and is just one example of an organisational culture (Stoll, 2007). Within this context, the term 'learning' refers to the development of learning through coaching, observation, action research, networking and reflection to enable opportunities for professional development, particularly with regard to skills and knowledge (Reeves, Forde, O'Brien, Smith and Tomlinson, 2002). This 'learning' holds merit within the shared understanding of Continuing Professional Development (CPD). This is a useful insight to shared beliefs within cultures that is explored further in the next section.

### **2.5.2 Shared Beliefs in Organisational Cultures**

Historically, an inappropriate or misleading view of schools as organisations has formed due to previous poor analysis of organisational cultures from a theoretical stance in schools (Hoyle, 1965). Since the mid-1960s, a change in thinking has led to an assumed belief that a high level of consistency and stability within organisations leading to schools striving to achieve a defined or specific goal and where a difference lies across different educational settings (Westoby, 1988).

More recently, new thinking about these shared beliefs in ethics, and where the relationships and collaboration between people within an organisation is considered, has changed the outcome of the way cultures are believed to be formed (Nias, 1999). Westoby's (1998) theory has been re-examined by Harris and Bennett (2001), who suggest that shared belief involves embracing concepts of the culture incorporating not only the norms, but also embedding what the organisation is about. Hopkins (2007) continues, outlining that a key focus of this shared belief lies in developing and sustaining a positive culture for teaching and learning within the organisation.

School improvement is influenced by the drive of the head teacher and this has an impact on the culture of the school (Jackson, 2000; Harris and Bennett, 2001). Research shows that the leadership style and moral purpose of the head teacher, and the modelling of good practice, should filter through the school to create a positive culture (Bennis and Nanus, 1985; Fullan, 2001). However, if individuals within this culture are driven by their own morals to do the right thing, and teachers are encouraged in their role to improve the quality of teaching and learning through a process of reflection, then the culture of the school should be reflected in this process (Hopkins, 2007). Taking these opinions into account, the shared beliefs in an organisation and the moral purpose of the head teacher can determine the 'goal orientation' present within the group to agree the actions and shared vision, suggesting that without this collaboration, a culture cannot be sufficiently formed (Nias, 1999; Earley and Bubb, 2007).

A good example of shared belief implies that the "socio-cultural nature of the workplace will not only influence practice but also what and how individuals learn" (Kubiak and Sanberg, 2001 pg 653). This suggests that there is inherent importance to the role that leaders play within the school in terms of who determine the organisational structure, and whilst this can differ depending on the type or size of the school, the underpinning message remains pertinent. Argued by Harris (2002), a strong moral purpose and a clear, shared vision led by the head teacher can have a powerful impact on the creation of the organisational culture. Within established cultures common attitudes form based upon shared belief (Hopkins, 2007). The culture of a setting, the routines and training, as claimed by Goodrich and Cornwell (2008), play a significant part in

the quality of care. Whilst their article refers to care given in hospitals, this can be applied to the education setting, in particular to a special school setting whereby care often plays a part in the role of LSA, and teacher, alongside the role of educator. According to Case (2008) when examining the hierarchy of a school, individuals' perceptions within these layers will be influenced by the identity of the people within it, and the way in which these people perceive themselves. In terms of shared beliefs, this could result in sub-cultures forming.

Further, examining more closely the impact of sub-cultures on organisational cultures, falls within the realm of inevitable change within schools. This could be as a direct result of a change in leadership, or policy, as well as changes that may occur within teams. Since change can occur at any time, Fullan (2001) states that it is important for a culture, or professional learning community to be prepared and to create sustainability within the organisation. It is necessary here to clarify what is meant by this, and Hopkins (2007), helps to distinguish how that sustainability can be achieved by dedicating time for professional development opportunities, to enable staff to share in the experience to improve practice. This approach is similar to that of Harris (2002), who details that the role of school improvement and changes occurring within the school is underpinned by teaching staff who are a fundamental part of this process. Challenges follow, however, when new leaders attempt to alter or change the vision of the school and the difficulties of individuals being unwilling to adapt their mind-set to support the leader (Fullan, 1992).

Within education, the term 'culture' has been characterised as "promoting growth and the climate for development" (Tuohy, 1999 pg 9). This 'growth', or passage of change, could alter shared beliefs and impact upon the organisational culture thus creating sub-cultures that have differing views and beliefs. A key issue with differences in views or beliefs between these sub-cultures arises when the cultures are incompatible (Wallace and Pocklington, 2002). Therefore, creating gaps within the shared belief of these sub-cultures can result in challenges in development and growth within the organisation. The impact of change and differences in sub-cultures can alter the perspective individuals within each culture have, including the way people act and work together, creating

unfavourable working environments and differences in expectations, rules and traditions within the school (Deal and Peterson, 2016).

In terms of creating sustainable and successful shared beliefs in organisational cultures, the process of change must start with the head teacher. In their detailed examination of shared beliefs, Harris and Bennett (2001) showed that it is the responsibility of the head teacher to set boundaries and put sufficient training in place to enable individuals in the culture to share in the beliefs and values. When reflecting upon the process of change, and the nature of school environments, often-intrinsic sub-cultures surface with cultures within these groups evolving (Harris, 2002). Through reflective practice and leadership and organisational competence to develop the perspectives of others within the culture, this can counteract potential difficulties (Hughes and Wearing, 2017).

### **2.5.3 The Role of LSA in Organisational Cultures**

A special school culture can be categorised into four cultures – the senior leaders, the teachers, the learning support assistants and class teams. These sub-cultures are not necessarily different to those within a primary school, however the numbers within each culture may differ significantly, with often many more LSAs working within a special school, creating a larger sub-culture of LSAs. It has also become commonplace within special schools for sub-cultures to include a class teacher and a group of LSAs. These sub-cultures form as a result of staff teams within classes and the close working relationships that are developed. Whilst these sub-cultures ought to integrate as interlocking systems, as previously outlined, it can be potentially problematic when this does not occur (Tuohy, 1999). The idea of interlocking sub-cultures suggests that the vision and belief of these sub-cultures relates back to the overarching ethos of the school vision laid out by the head teacher (Tuohy, 1999), where the responsibility lies with the head teacher in sharing their vision amongst the staff team. The key problem with this explanation is that teachers and LSAs potentially have multiple professional identities that depend on the context and environmental factors. This is a problem because the visions and values inherent within the individuals in a sub-culture may differ creating difficulties in these sub-cultures interlocking. One

question that needs to be asked at this point, however, is whether this impacts on the role teachers and LSAs have within these sub-cultures? Given that Floyd and Fuller (2014) point out that exploring a person's identity is a complex process involving social, cultural, political and historical factors, including how that individual fits within the culture, a more intricate answer is required.

Although individuals are able to control how they present themselves, limitations become apparent if it is to be believed that individuals are unable to control the way they are perceived by others in specific situations. In the same way, these professional identities are ever-changing and can be influenced by a range of factors including internal motivation and external variables such as prior experiences (Goffman, 1959; Berger and Luckman, 1966; Izadina, 2013). Therefore, when thinking about the role of LSAs within the organisational culture, a more thorough explanation is required taking into account both theoretical stand points and research.

Where LSAs are valued in school, they have a positive impact on the learning process (DfES, 2000). Hammett and Burton's (2000) study, carried out in a secondary school examined the perceptions of staff and took into consideration findings from the DfES. The school in which this study took place caters for approximately 1000 secondary age pupils, where over 30 per cent of its students have SEN and although only one example, this study shed light upon the influence work behaviour has upon those that feel less valued within a culture and how this can lead to role-related stress (Hammett and Burton, 2000). The case reported here illustrates how a lack of appropriate induction, training and progression can manifest as low morale and perceived low status. Their study is pertinent within this research as the findings from it resonate as a potential influencing factor that can contribute to a breakdown in organisational culture and a lack of shared moral purpose within a school.

Differences in experience can cause challenges to arise where personal perspectives and visions of individuals create a collapse in cultures being formed. There is some evidence to suggest that in some cases the role of leader will be the teacher leading within the classroom environment working with two or more LSAs, something that is particularly relevant in a special school (Day, Harris and

Hadfield, 2001). One aspect of the teacher's role is described as empowering LSAs to feel part of the team, to develop personally and professionally and to be afforded with the same respect the teacher would expect, regardless of background (Lacey, 2001). The study carried out by Lacey (2001) examined the role of LSAs working with pupils with severe learning difficulties (SLD) and profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) and suggested that conflict can arise as a result of insufficient time to communicate around planning and assessment. These results are similar to those reported by Twisleton (2004) and Bleach (2014) who highlight that unclear expectations set out by teaching staff, or where individual perceptions of professional identity are not shared between colleagues due to differing experiences of what the role entails, caused challenges in their relationships. Twisleton (2004) sought out in her longitudinal study to examine teacher identities and involved 47 student teachers. This five year study revealed that the student teachers' perceptions of their role was determined by their "understanding of the groups with which they identify" (Twisleton, 2004 pg 159). Placing this example into the special school setting, the differing expectations placed upon LSAs by the teacher from the teacher's experience has the potential to cause difficulties in developing relationships and building positive cultures.

Whilst aimed as a strategy to reduce teacher workload, the deployment of more LSAs to support teachers was considered to be seen as a crucial factor in reducing teacher workload, and was received with mixed success (Blatchford, et al., 2009; Rhodes, 2006). The study, which focused on the experiences and perceptions of seven learning mentors, included individuals from both primary and secondary schools within a deprived social, cultural and economic catchment in England. The interviews with these seven mentors revealed the potential impact that learning mentors and LSAs have to impact on teacher workload, but only when school leaders support the development of the LSAs both professionally and within the culture of the school through CPD opportunities and working closely with teachers (Rhodes, 2006).

The examples described above can contribute to challenges within the culture, particularly for LSAs who may be left feeling as though they are not part of the organisational culture and wider community of the school. The purpose of the

team, however, is to achieve shared outcomes, which is achievable when good leaders are able to communicate clear educational values (Kydd, Anderson and Newton, 2003).

Therefore, taking into account these potential challenges, it is an important aspect of this case study to examine the perceived value of staff within the school, with a particular focus on LSAs and understanding how they feel valued. This will include offering staff opportunities to provide examples of how this is achieved in the school, or could be better managed to ensure all members of staff are part of the organisational culture. This study will provide insight into the culture(s) currently present within the school and create a better understanding of the development of professional identities within the organisational culture. This will be with particular reference to attitudes and behaviour amongst sub-cultures and the influence this has upon the organisational culture, especially if this is a negative influence.

This section examined organisational cultures and the role of sub-cultures within the wider community. Key questions emerged from this critique of literature which link to this study:

- How do LSAs work effectively as part of a team or sub-culture?
- In what ways do LSAs feel valued and respected by teachers and senior leaders?
- To what extent is the shared vision of the school promoted to develop a collaborative organisational culture?

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The main objectives for this study are to explore the relationships between groups of people who work within a special school and to identify how these groups work together. Through a critique of the literature, defining the key concepts in context and understanding their position within this study it is possible to observe weaknesses in the current research with regard to this topic of interest.

For the purposes of this case study, the keys terms used are defined as:

Professional identity refers to the identity with which an individual has based upon their personal experiences and perceptions within the context of their profession (Floyd and Fuller, 2014).

Professionalism of a person relates to any person working within a professional role whereby they act ethically with specialist skills and knowledge (Carr, 2000).

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) represents the learning opportunities made by an individual to develop in their skills, knowledge and professionalism within their chosen field of expertise (Craft, 2000).

An organisational culture involves a group of individuals working towards the same goal and shared belief where meaningful relationships are developed (Stoll, 2007).

An individual who is able to develop and share the values and beliefs of their colleagues whilst demonstrating ethical behaviour, even during challenging situations holds professional integrity (Hopkins, 2007).

Critical analysis of literature in current research has modelled similarities to the special school setting. However, since much of the current literature is based on research carried out predominately in mainstream primary and secondary schools, both in England and internationally there are limitations to their relevance to this English special school.

Through a critique of the literature, it has been established that LSAs need to be provided with support to, and be encouraged to, develop their own professional identities within the ever increasing role that LSAs have in schools. LSA are a part of education and how they are deployed in schools has changed since the DISS-Study (Blatchford, et al., 2009) where more time should be placed upon joint planning and feedback between the teacher and LSA, as well as the need to build in professional development opportunities to enable LSAs to better support pupils with their learning.

Several points have been argued throughout the literature review, crucially gauging the opportunities LSAs have for establishing their own professional

identities and how this concept has developed in education. The parallel transition that teachers have made through the process opens up new opportunities to support LSAs in their own right as professionals and how this can be achieved has been examined. This study will establish the role that LSAs have in a special school unpicking the impact the DISS-Study has had on their role, as gaps in the literature still remain in this area of education.

With the changing role and expectations placed upon LSAs in school as a result of the DISS-Study and Ofsted criteria, a need for ensuring LSAs have professional development opportunities plays a fundamental part of their ability to be successful in their role. The nature and concept of CPD in schools should include clear guidelines and priorities to enable all staff, including LSAs to develop professionally. This can be achieved through different strategies but since there are limitations in advice and procedures for LSA development it is up to the school to determine how CPD will be presented to LSAs. Through unpicking how CPD is provided to the LSAs in one particular school we can begin to understand how a head teacher might be able to promote such opportunities for their staff.

Examination of the organisational cultures and the idea that the culture is influenced by the head teacher's moral purpose has an impact upon the position staff have within that culture. Looking more closely at how LSAs fit within this culture is determined by the way in which senior leaders are able to ensure that an environment is created whereby there is a shared ethos and vision. For LSAs this culture includes fitting into the micro-scale working within their class teams led by the teacher, ensuring that all members of that team, whatever size it is, are able to feel themselves to be valued members. This study will explore at three levels if and how this can be achieved, from the perspectives of the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders in an environment where the numbers of LSAs greatly outweighs that of the teachers and SLT.

Through the course of defining the key concepts of professional identity, continuing professional development and organisation culture and examining how these terms became established within education, it can be seen how they are essential in the performance of a school. What can be seen from this review

of the literature are three separate key concepts that inter-relate as part of the school organisation.

Within this context, the term “professional identity” refers to the ability an individual has to act professionally and to choose how they behave in a situation (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Further, by gauging the value placed upon the individual to ensure that all members of staff within a school organisation have opportunities to develop professionally and engage in CPD, we can begin to better understand the context of such interrelationships. Knowing that characteristics of a professional include training, codes of ethics and being highly skilled and knowledgeable (John, 2008), the study aims to better understand these relationships in a special school environment.

For both teaching staff and LSAs entering the world of special education, there will be elements of professionalism embedded from their training and experience where they have entered the education profession. However, the idea of professionalism within a special school is likely to fluctuate between individuals, from the head teacher through to teaching staff, LSAs and even lunch staff. The importance lies within the head teachers’ portrayal and perception of what it means to act professionally and model this appropriately to his or her staff as the impression they make upon their staff team will have a lasting impact. Similarly, the leadership style that they adopt and the culture the staff create through this are crucial to the sustainability of their role and the influence they will have on developing a successful working environment (Fullan, 1992).

We have seen that increasing numbers of LSAs in schools and the continued ambiguity of their roles and confusion over their responsibilities has left many LSAs unsure of how they fit within the organisational culture and what CPD opportunities they should be presented with. Bearing this in mind, there are misconceptions about the professional status held by LSAs (or lack thereof) because of such ambiguities. Fundamentally, school leaders play a significant role in outlining not only the expectations placed on staff, but also for providing all staff with opportunities to progress and develop professionalism.

Policies and procedures are constantly changing and school leaders must act on this and provide LSAs, and teachers with time to reflect on their skill set and

knowledge base, providing clear, defined role profiles and job descriptions. Pay structure and performance management targets act as a direct way of creating a career path and can be linked to the School Improvement Plan to develop teaching and learning.

Particularly pertinent in a special school is the vast numbers of LSAs that work in the setting to provide support to the teachers, children and families and this role must be acknowledged as a key factor in the success of the school. Currently under investigated in the literature is the understanding of the perception that LSAs have of their role and their stance within the organisational culture (Mistry, et al., 2004). Further, the perceptions teachers and senior leaders have of the professional role of LSAs has also been under explored.

These factors reflect a gap in the literature, making this study particularly interesting and valuable. The first strand of this study is to examine the perceptions the LSAs have of their role, focusing on their idea of professionalism and how they have been able to develop a professional identity within their role. Policies that support and encourage professionalism in the work place will be scrutinised to consider how CPD is presented to the staff, with a particular focus on the LSAs. How the structure and organisational culture of the school accounts for the many LSAs, ensuring the ethos and values of the school are emulated throughout will also be explored. To truly understand the organisational culture of the school, the perspectives of the teachers and senior leaders will be cross-examined with the intention that the findings will provide insight and new knowledge about the working professional relationships between the staff as an original case study. These issues all contribute to the study's key research questions:

“What are the perceptions and experiences of LSAs in a special school in England and how are they perceived by teachers and senior staff?”. The sub questions posed to address this question are:

- Q1. How do LSAs perceive their role and their professional identities within an English special school?
- Q2. How do the teachers and senior staff perceive the role of the LSA in the school?

- Q3. How do LSAs perceive and experience CPD within the school and what are their development needs?
- Q4. To what extent is a shared vision, or ethos, promoted within the school to develop a collaborative organisational culture?

# Chapter Three – Methodology

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## 3.1 Introduction

The main aim of this thesis was to build a case study that explores the role of Learning Support Assistants (LSA) who work in a special school in England. Chapter Two focused on a thorough and detailed literature review based upon the three key concepts of professional identity, continuing professional development (CPD) and organisational culture and showed how these interrelate in the special school setting. The overarching research question is “What are the perceptions and experiences of LSAs in a special school in England and how are they perceived by teachers and senior staff?”

Further questions underpinning this question have been identified:

- Q1. How do LSAs perceive their role and their professional identities within an English special school?
- Q2. How do the teachers and senior staff perceive the role of the LSA in the school?
- Q3. How do LSAs perceive and experience CPD within the school and what are their development needs?
- Q4. To what extent is a shared vision, or ethos, promoted within the school to develop a collaborative organisational culture?

This chapter will explain and justify the decisions taken in order to address these research questions.

## 3.2 Paradigm Rationale

In research, paradigms are used to describe the way researchers think about and research the world. Within the social sciences there are considered to be two approaches to thinking about knowledge and how we acquire knowledge (Thomas, 2009), these two main paradigms are positivism and interpretivism. Positivism is largely associated with a quantitative approach which involves

experiments and surveys where statistical data is yielded (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). On the contrary, the interpretivist paradigm is based upon the premise of understanding the subjective world of human experience and is often linked with qualitative data (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

Positivism was historically associated with the French philosopher Comte during the Nineteenth Century. He believed that knowledge is based on observation and experiment (Cohen, et al., 2011). This paradigm focuses on more traditional research methods with an understanding that knowledge can only be obtained through the use of the scientific method (Flick, 2009). Until recently positivism has been the dominating paradigm within social research. The way in which knowledge is obtained by positivists involves rigorously measuring, recording and observing what can be seen and heard (Thomas, 2011) and is more similar to scientific research methods, isolating a variable and developing hypotheses. Therefore, inherent within positivist research is a belief that the researcher should seek truth without bias whilst acting objectively (Comstock, 2013).

The interpretivist paradigm by contrast, is based heavily upon perspectives stemming from the theories laid out in Berger and Luckmann's (1966) 'The Social Construction of Reality'. Berger and Luckmann's theory, which has since been explored by modern theorists, identified assumptions predicating that individuals seek understanding of the world subjectively creating their own complex views of the world (Creswell, 2003).

The development of the interpretivist paradigm in the social world has led to the argument that the truth cannot so easily be objectively achieved. The idea of interpretivism is concerned with people, where the researcher is required to understand knowledge about people, challenging the realms of qualitative data methods (Cohen, et al., 2009). Findings are often less objective as a result of individual interpretations of views and behaviours made by the researcher of the participants (Thomas, 2011). Within the interpretivist paradigm, there is an inherent understanding that words, events and observations can have different meanings for each of us (Thomas, 2009); therefore, it requires knowledge of people and behaviours and it is much more difficult to use this approach without bias. However, researcher insight plays a significant role within this paradigm as

it allows for the researcher to bring subjectivity to their role, particularly when the researcher is able to embrace their role and observe changes that take place during the research process (Acker, Barry, Essevald, 1983; Patton, 2002).

For this study, the main aim was to explore the views and perceptions of leaders, teachers and LSAs working in a special school. This research lies within the interpretivist paradigm because it is guided by the researcher's beliefs and views of the world, and the way in which it is understood and studied is relative to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). To successfully understand the perceptions and experiences of the LSAs in this study, we must engage with the participants, observing their knowledge and feelings. Further, the researcher's own experiences are placed highly within this study, understanding that human interactions and interpretations underpin this study within the interpretivist paradigm.

### **3.3 Research Design: Case Study**

Since the main aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of people and understand how professional identities are formed through the parameters of qualitative, interpretive research, it is appropriate to use a case study approach. A case study involves in depth research into one, or a small set, of cases (Davies, 2007). For this project one school has been examined.

The term "case" has many varying definitions as highlighted by Thomas (2011) and from this it can be determined that a case study in research terms has layers of meaning which will be unravelled through the process of defining the term "case". In doing so, it becomes clear how mixed methods of research are an integral part of developing a successful case study. By understanding what the "case" represents we can begin to unpick the layers, in this study, that are integral contributors (Flick, 2009). For this project, the "case" represents the school, unpicking the LSAs, teachers and SLT and their perceptions who form the layers present within the school. To be able to understand their perceptions, their part in the research process is crucial; through using questionnaires as a means to engage the LSA in the project, and interviews to tease out and truly understand the position of the LSA, teachers and senior leaders in the school we begin to

establish how the case study is forming. Further, engaging with and developing deeper meaning to their perceptions, a crucial element to this study was to understand how the LSAs were perceived by their colleagues.

The purpose of using a mixed methods approach (see Section 3.7) is to build a case study. In order to achieve this, the following methods have been used to collect data: questionnaires for LSAs; interviews with LSAs, teachers and senior leaders; and document analysis of school policies that are pertinent to the key concepts. Each of the sets of data collected have been chosen to better understand the research problem and explore the participants' subjective perspective on the three key concepts that underpin this case study.

### **3.4 The Pilot Study**

A pilot study was carried out as a prerequisite for developing the case study and took place in a different special school to that of the case study school. The purpose of the pilot study was to enable the researcher to test techniques and gain experience with data collection as well as to compare methods and acquire informed knowledge of which methods would provide valuable and rich data for the case study (Thomas, 2011). This included reflecting on the design and use of questionnaires and the extensive process of trialling questions, taking into consideration possible misconceptions or misunderstanding of questions during the interviews (Kvale, 2007).

Further, the value of this pilot study means that the researcher has been able to gain a better understanding of possible ethical implications for the study, particularly given that the study was based upon the opinions and perceptions of people and the impact this may have as a result of taking part in the study (Cohen, et al., 2011).

The special school within which the pilot study took place caters for primary age pupils with moderate to severe learning difficulties. This school was chosen as it has many similarities to the special school in the case study, especially in terms of the nature of the role that the LSAs have within the structure and organisation of the school. This includes that the number of LSAs outweighs that of the

teaching staff and within both settings they work closely in class teams with a teacher. The LSAs have school responsibilities according to their 'Grade', which lends for discussion around their individual professional development opportunities.

As previously discussed the role of LSA has changed dramatically over the years from 'helper' through a gradual process to becoming a more professional role, particularly with the change in legislation from the government and then the implementation of these changes by local authorities (Lacey, 2001). LSAs that have been in the role for many years will have been part of this process of change in terms of legislation but it is likely that they will also have seen a change in the complexity of the needs of the pupils attending the school in which they work. This similarly will have had an impact on the need to develop and adapt skills to fit the role of LSA.

In order to understand this change in the role of LSAs in the school, the data were collected through questionnaires and a discussion group. The purpose of this was to act as a trial for the researcher to develop their skills particularly with writing effective questions in the questionnaire, and to engage purposefully with the LSAs directly through the discussion group. It was decided to carry out a discussion rather than individual interviews to ensure that the participants had opportunities to share some opinions in a forum with familiar people and to help put them at ease with an unknown person as the interviewer.

Offering two strands of data collection allowed the researcher to gather valuable insight into the daily responsibilities of the LSAs, targeting a larger number of responses than would be possible through interviews or a discussion group alone.

Acting as a strategy to facilitate communication (Davies, 2007) and enable the researcher to collect both qualitative and quantitative data, the questionnaire contained a number of multiple choice questions to provide some background to the LSAs, to determine the wealth and breadth of experience and knowledge represented by the sample. The remaining questions were a mixture of closed questions, to ensure responses were focused and open questions, to allow the respondent to answer with their own independent view. The discussion group

schedule was based upon the outcomes of the questionnaires facilitating further understanding of the responses given in the questionnaires. The pilot study was carried out as a precursor to this case study to develop research methods and understand how chosen methods will shape the case study for this thesis.

### **3.4.1 Data Analysis from the Pilot Study**

The researcher gained skills and experience in data collection and data analysis through the pilot study, as well as gathering interesting findings. The value of this insight aided the researcher in being better informed to successfully collect and analyse data for the case study. In order to help interpret the data collected, the researcher was required to undertake content analysis, to transcribe video footage from the discussion group and to do some simple coding of themes to enable them to interpret the meanings of their research. For the pilot study, video recording was chosen as it enabled the researcher to gain another dimension to the data analysis by observing non-verbal cues and taking into account interactions amongst those being interviewed (Davies, 2007). Also, for this particular study where the participants were not familiar to the researcher, voice recording alone would have been challenging to transcribe as voices overlap and are not as distinguishable. Having the visual footage enabled the researcher to be clear, when typing up transcripts of which participant was speaking, ensuring the views of each were recorded correctly.

During the analysis stage it was crucial for the researcher to consider the aim of the research, which heavily involved exploring personal experiences of the perspectives of different people (Davies, 2007). The use of content analysis acted as an approach to reflect on the perspectives of people, which was a key element of the pilot study; in qualitative research this analysis is often descriptive (Krippendorff, 1980, Fallik and Francis, 2016). This method also offered some flexibility to the researcher as they interpreted the meaning of the data and considered the problem that was being studied (Cavanagh, 1997; Hsieh and Shannon, 2005).

Content analysis is widely used to code open ended questions in questionnaires, and to reveal a focus or trend in communicative content (Weber, 1990).

Therefore, coding data acted as a valuable tool in the pilot study and was used to support theoretical sampling and to draw connections between codes. It is important to acknowledge that, particularly in the case of interpretivism, it is possible for codes to be generated or interpreted in more than one way, where it is not possible to “assume stable properties in the social world” (Silverman, 2001, pg 226) and therefore the reliability in coding does not exist. The value of this, however, is that the depth of the responses given by participants can be sought through scrutiny of the questionnaires and transcripts.

This means that, once codes have been established, further analysis as to the context within which these themes are discussed can be taken into consideration. This can often lead to some of the main themes being further sub-categorised where arguably the whole process can follow eleven steps (Cohen, et al., 2011). These eleven steps begin with defining the research questions that are to be addressed by the analysis; defining the population from the samples; defining the sample; onto defining the context of the document and defining the units of analysis. Following this, the codes to be used in the analysis need to be decided; then categories constructed; with the coding and categorising of data to take place next. Finally, the data analysis is conducted; the data is summarised and inferences are made (Cohen, et al., 2011). In summary, this process involves a combination of interpretation of the written text which can have multiple meanings and interpretations, often being personal and drawn out of context (Krippendorff, 2012) and a quantitative nature by counting the concepts or themes in tabular form (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998).

The pilot study played an instrumental role in the research study, enabling the researcher to gain valuable skills and knowledge around writing questionnaires, using content analysis and to prepare them in ensuring the data they collected as part of the case study was worthwhile, rich and of value. This is with regard to the process as a whole from drafting the questionnaire, to seeking the sample, analysis of data and interpretation of findings. More crucially, the pilot study allowed the researcher to begin to develop the research questions for the case study, and to refine data collection methods and understand the data analysis process. More detail is offered below (see Section 3.7)

## **3.5 Research Process**

This case study used questionnaires as a starting point, and then through interviews was able to elaborate on the responses given by participants. This means the researcher analysed the questionnaires and used this analysis to formulate the interview schedule so as to seek and engage with the interviewee on a more personal level. The interviews allowed the researcher to understand better the perception of the LSAs and their role in the school. The strengths and limitations of using these methods are discussed below.

### **3.5.1. Questionnaires**

Findings from the pilot study highlighted the benefits of using questionnaires in the research project to form part of the case study. As with any research method, however, there are, of course limitations. Established from the pilot study, the strengths far outweigh these limitations for the purposes of this case study. The writing of questionnaires can be time consuming; however, this time is incredibly valuable and crucial to ensuring that the questionnaires act as a successful research tool. Time should be spent on thinking about the order in which questions are asked, or ensuring that terminology is explained within the context of the study with importance placed upon the language used for each question to avoid ambiguity or misinterpretation (Bell, 2005). Furthermore, when questionnaire-writing it is important to take the time to include a variety of types of questions (Cohen, et al., 2011). As part of the development process of questionnaires, the researcher needed to consider the purpose of each question and what they aimed to achieve from each response (Thomas, 2009). By including several types of questions the researcher was able to gather a range of useful and comparative data. Previous experience of the researcher of writing questionnaires for the pilot study gave the researcher an understanding of how effective and valuable the different types of questions could be in gaining useful data for this study.

Crucial, to the use of questionnaires as a data method is trialling it. This allows for the structure, order and presentation of the questionnaire to be analysed prior to its use ensuring that it is easy to use, with little room for misinterpretation of questions, and to include relevant information regarding confidentiality, anonymity and how the questionnaire will be used (Davies, 2007). Analysis of well written questionnaires are comparatively quicker than other methods; and provided the questions have been well thought out and planned, offer rich and valuable data.

As with any method of research there needs to be ethical considerations taking place; for this study these will be discussed in Section 3.10. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1.

### **3.5.2 Interviews**

Given that the research aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of people, the use of interviews in this study acted as a crucial strategy to gain a different dimension and delve deeper into the perceptions of the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders. In order to achieve this in the most successful way to answer the research questions. Using interviews allowed the researcher to unpick some of the responses provided by the LSAs to gain more details and understanding through more open-ended questions (Kvale, 2007).

When completing the questionnaires, LSAs were asked to state whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. On receipt of these questionnaires the researcher got into contact with each LSA to arrange an interview. Both the teaching staff and senior leaders were contacted via email with a copy of the information sheet outlining the study (Appendix 2). Mutually convenient times and places were arranged with participants for the interviews to take place, to suit their lifestyles including offering telephone interviews, Skype and face-to-face interviews.

All participants agreed to meet face-to-face, which was invaluable to the researcher as this method allowed for the researcher to connect with the interviewee on a personal level whilst observing changes in their behaviour with

regard to their responses and reactions to questions and topics (Thomas, 2009). This was crucial to the study, to fully understand their true perceptions and beliefs through tone of voice and mannerisms; contextual behaviour that is often missed through other data collection methods.

The interview schedule was drawn from data analysis of the questionnaire responses provided by the LSAs, and with reference to the literature review. By spending time analysing the initial data, the researcher was able to gauge some early feedback from the LSAs with regards to their perception of their role in the school, and how they felt with regards to their role both as a professional and in relation to their CPD opportunities. The themes that arose from the LSA questionnaires and interviews acted as a starting point for the interview schedules for both the teachers and senior leaders. Questions were based upon gaining a deeper understanding of the role of the LSA and perceptions that the teachers and senior leaders have of the LSAs to gain a different perspective. (See appendices 3-5)

The researcher had an interview schedule for each of the cohorts being interviewed, however, unlike questionnaires, there is flexibility with interviews. The skilful interviewer, with a firm knowledge of the research themes and the ability to recognise human interaction, holds successful interviews by capturing rich and useful data (Kvale, 2007). The researcher was able to gain some experiences of these skills from the discussion group in the pilot study, studying facial expressions and reactions of others in the group.

All of the interviews carried out were voice-recorded rather than video-recorded. It was felt that video-recording the interviews may have made the participants feel as though they were being 'watched' and feel less comfortable in the interview. Furthermore, for the purpose of the one-to-one interviews, it was felt that voice-recording would allow for a more natural dialogue between the participant and the researcher, whilst keeping eye contact to ensure the participant felt at ease and comfortable during the interview (Bell, 2005). It was felt that the benefits of video-recording, such as observing interactions and non-verbal cues could be achieved more easily in the one-to-one interviews and therefore video-recording was not necessary for this study (Davies, 2007). By

voice-recording the interviews, the researcher was able to take notes but spend time listening to the interviewee and observe their behaviour changes at certain points of the interview (Thomas, 2009). It was felt this would make the interviewee feel more comfortable and therefore provide more candid responses. It was important for the interviewer to ensure that the interviews were at least voice-recorded as it is virtually impossible to take accurate notes during the interview whilst also giving the participant the researcher's valued attention. To not record the interview can lead to less reliable data as a result of the constraints of needing to take accurate notes during the interview (Cohen, et al., 2011).

As with all research methods, each has its strengths and limitations. Crucial when interviewing is to clarify any potential misinterpretations of meanings from the interviewee (Bell, 2005). This means allowing the interviewee to respond in their own words, seeking clarification where possible. This can be achieved by asking questions to confirm facts and opinions, or by recapping what has been discussed, allowing the interviewee an opportunity to confirm the meaning of what they have shared (Davies, 2007; Cohen, et al., 2011).

A challenge that may have arisen because of interviewing is social desirability bias (Bryman, 2012). Social desirability bias refers to evidence that responses provided are based upon the perception of what interviewees believe to be the desired response. It is also likely that researcher bias is present within interviews, particularly when there is a team of interviewers. Researcher bias in interviews is most conspicuous when the researcher demonstrates strong views over a topic, especially when the researcher makes careful selections in choosing questions that support their point of view (Bell, 2005). This can be overcome when the researcher is aware of their viewpoint and questions their practice, to recognise signs of bias.

At the time of interviews, the researcher was not a member of the staff team, however the researcher knew some members of the staff team. In view of this fact, the concept of insider and outsider researcher alongside the researcher's evaluation of their own approach during interviews needs to be considered. The organisational culture being studied in this thesis is exposed to both positions of the researcher as an 'insider' and an 'outsider' and it should be taken into account

whether one position provides the researcher with advantages compared to the other and how this will impact upon the research process (Hammersley, 1993). Where an individual undertakes interpretive insider research within their own setting and where participants are colleagues of the researcher, ethical implications for those involved, both directly and indirectly, can arise (Floyd and Arthur, 2012). As a result of the insider researcher position, certain ethical issues can be identified. These deeper issues refer to the layers, described by Tolich (2004) as ensuring anonymity for participants; but also a secondary layer where internal confidentiality surfaces as a risk to those involved in the project as they may be able to identify each other. Therefore, further ethical considerations are required to be taken into account by the researcher as part of this complex process. For example, ethical issues raised in research for an outsider will naturally fade once the research has been completed and written up, however, for an insider researcher some feelings and sympathies may continue after time has passed due to the nature of the relationships between the researcher and participant, whose professional relationship will likely persist beyond the research period (Floyd and Arthur, 2012). Such ethical issues may include existing and persisting professional relationships, insider knowledge and anonymity, with insider researchers being challenged to anticipate professional and moral dilemmas as part of the research process, and potentially also be required to deal with these for some time after the research has finished (Floyd and Arthur, 2012).

The socially constructed view of the world from the perspective of the researcher (Berger and Luckman, 1966) should reflect upon their position in the study in relation to the participants, the topic of interest and the context and process of the research. Therefore, throughout the research process, the researcher should be critical of their own approach, values, ethics and integrity (Bryman, 2012) and understand their own influence of the study both towards participants known to the researcher (insider) and those that are unknown (outsider). Honesty and truth about the researcher's positionality and the potential to influence their interpretations should be reflected on to ensure that questions and discussions are not led by researcher motives to reinforce their own opinions. To address these issues, an outline of the researcher's motives and background was included in Chapter 1 to show transparency. Furthermore, necessary steps were

put in place to acknowledge this influence and for participants to not feel swayed to respond to questions in a certain way but for the participant to respond honestly based upon their own interpretations of their experiences. This meant the researcher was clear to not express their own opinions, or ask leading questions during the interviews, but only used questions to clarify meaning during discussions. Due to the researcher no longer working within the case study school environment, the ethical implications of the 'insider' researcher position was not considered to be of serious concern.

### **3.6 The Case Study School**

This study takes place in a local state funded special school for pupils with severe learning difficulties. Pupils who attend the school have a variety of disabilities and associated learning difficulties; they require additional support to access the school curriculum. These include pupils with autism spectrum disorder; challenging behaviour; physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy; limited communication; and complex medical needs. Pupils who attend the school are aged between two-and-a-half and nineteen, with 96 pupils on roll for academic year 2015-2016. Some pupils will begin their education in the nursery department of the school, others will move from mainstream settings, or other special schools throughout their school age. Often there is an influx of pupils at secondary level moving from the local primary special school. In some cases, pupils who are able to will attend a local Sixth Form with support for their Post 16 provision; others will remain at the school until they are nineteen.

The school comprises of three senior leaders, including the head teacher. Nine teachers are currently employed in the school across the five key stages with 35 Learning Support Assistants, some working full time whilst others work part time. This data is correct as of the start of the academic year 2015-2016.

Pupils attending the school will have an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP), or be in the process of switching from the Statement of Educational Need to an EHCP. This documentation will outline clearly the education and non-educational provision for each pupil. The purpose of the EHCP is to identify a child's education, health and social needs and to outline the support required to meet

those needs. The local authority will make the decision as to whether the plan is going to be made for a child.

The school is divided into five key stages from, Early Years up to Post 16. The pupils will not necessarily spend the duration of their education at this establishment. Most pupils live with their parents and families, yet there are a number of pupils who live in a residential placement for all or most of the calendar year. Many of the pupils and families will access some level of 'respite' care through after school clubs, weekend clubs, carers visiting the home, overnight visits to care homes, or carers taking pupils out during evenings, weekends or holidays.

Further to this, pupils in the school will often access one or a combination of professionals outside that of the school staff, such as paediatricians, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, psychologists and social workers. School staff who work with the pupils are often required to carry out programmes, or care routines that have been put together by these professionals so as to support pupils in enriching their lives and enabling them to access the curriculum and be part of school life. The introduction of the EHCP acts as a way of ensuring that the appropriate provision is put in place for the pupils with all professionals working together to provide a detailed and structured package for the child, both from an educational perspective and for their health and well-being.

The EHCP, or Statement for those pupils who are currently on the 'old' system, is reviewed annually, with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that the teacher has put in place also revised in accordance with the progress and achievement the pupil has made. Within the special school setting, these IEPs are carried out by the class teacher and the LSAs and can vary considerably as they are tailored to meet the specific needs of the individual. It is crucial, however, that all of the professionals working with that pupil are skilled and qualified to put these plans in place, and that they make accurate assessments of pupil progress.

In order for staff to be able to achieve this, there may be training implications and it is the responsibility of the school, and professional involved with the pupil to ensure that training is provided to enable staff to perform their role. This may involve a physiotherapist training a staff member to carry out a physio

programme, or an occupational therapist demonstrating how to use a specific piece of equipment. In some cases, staff may be expected to gain knowledge and skills with particular medical conditions, such as epilepsy or gastrostomy feeding, taking on medical care for the pupil.

Pupils access an adapted curriculum based upon the New National Curriculum from 2014. The focus of the curriculum is to offer fundamental learning opportunities to meet the needs of the “whole child”. The curriculum offered to pupils has been adapted and designed to fulfil the requirements of the National Curriculum through a personalised and differentiated curriculum that is at the heart of teaching and learning. Further frameworks used to enhance the curriculum include the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and the ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) scheme for Key Stage 4 pupils and above. All information about the case study school can be found on the school’s website.

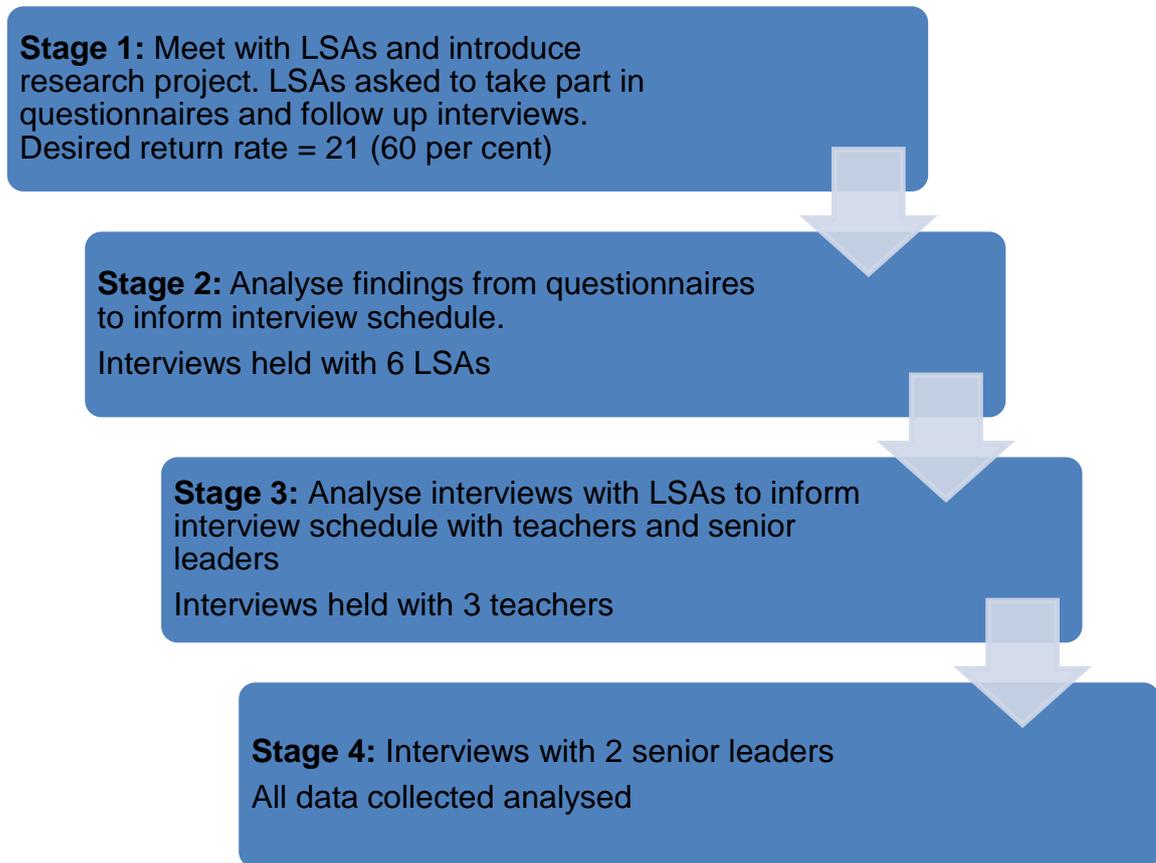
### 3.6.1. Participants

For this case study, one special school in England was chosen from which all the data has been collected. The diagram below shows the numbers of possible participants for each of the three groups; and how many participated at each stage of data collection. At the time of distribution of questionnaires and interviews, 35 LSAs were working in the school and 9 teachers. This is data for the academic year 2015-2016.



**Figure 3.1: Diagram to show possible numbers of participants at each stage and how many took part**

There were four key stages to the data collection element of the study. The following diagram shows this process and explains how each of the cohorts was invited to take part in the study.



**Figure 3.2: Diagram to show how data was collected at each stage**

### 3.7 Data Collection

The research design of the case study has been formed through several methods; this includes the literature review about the key concepts of professional identity, continuing professional development and organisational culture. Data were collected from participants through questionnaires and interviews, and school policies reviewed. With regard to collecting data from participants, this was achieved through several strategies; these will be outlined below including an evaluation of methods that were not selected.

Methods for data collection were chosen based upon a critical evaluation of a variety of qualitative data methods. This included consideration of methods that were not, such as observation and focus groups. Observation as a research

method involves the use of all the senses and can be differentiated based upon further analysis (Flick, 2009). According to Flick (2009), there are five dimensions of observation which include covert and overt observation. This is determined by several factors, including how much the participants are aware they are being observed, the amount the observer is an active part in the observation, and the systems applied during the observation. Natural observations refer to those that may take place in the participants' natural environment and artificial observations occur within an engineered scenario. In both examples, the participants may respond to the observations differently causing implications for the interpretations of the observation by the researcher, or by others of the observation due to unnatural interactions (Flick, 2009). As this research seeks to understand the relationships and professionalism amongst the staff; it was felt that observations of staff in their working environment would not yield the rich data that could be achieved through questionnaires and interviews with the staff members. The nature of the working environment of the LSAs lends for busy days and mostly interactions with the class teacher and pupils; each day would be unique and to a certain extent unpredictable therefore it would be challenging to compare the observations of LSAs in one class to that of another. Further, all those within the class would be required to agree to their participation in the observations and this could lead to some more reluctant participants feeling uncomfortable or feeling as though they need to 'perform', 'impress' or influence the researcher through their interactions and behaviour (Cohen, et al., 2011). Therefore, difficulties would lie in participation observation influencing behaviours and the ethnographic dilemma. Thus, this approach was not used in this study.

To begin, the questionnaire was drafted based upon the findings from the literature review and analysis of key policies. Trialling the questionnaire provided an opportunity to gauge a response and to refine or modify research techniques (Thomas, 2009). The initial draft questionnaire was carried out with a similar group of LSAs in a different special school. This strategy was used to gain justifiable and accurate responses, as well as feedback about any questions they felt were unclear or ambiguous (Bell, 2005).

Positive feedback was received from the first draft of the questionnaire (see appendix 6), with positive comments regarding the format and layout of the

questions. Evidence suggested that a few of the questions needed re-wording to ensure a clear interpretation and so adjustments were made. For example, questions 9 and 10 were swapped, following feedback on the initial trial of the questionnaire. It was suggested that knowing more about the type of the interactions in question, in this question it is referring to specific pupil progress, participants would find it easier to answer regarding the frequency of these interactions. Further, clarification and emphasis was placed on ensuring the LSA completing the questionnaire answered for their own opinion, rather than what they felt others believed. For this, several questions, such as questions 11, 16 and 28 the “you” in the question was highlighted in bold to stand out. Question 15 was rephrased to provide a clearer focus to what was meant by initial and the time frame that this question was interested in for training. The revised questionnaire that was used for the study can be found in Appendix 1.

Trialling the questionnaire acted as an initial ‘conversation’ and concerns were raised by those that completed the questionnaire on the questions relating to opinions about senior leaders. Crucial, therefore, in the presentation and information sheet was the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that participants were fully informed that the questionnaires were anonymous and that only the researcher had access to the completed questionnaires. Ethical considerations will be detailed later in this chapter (Section 3.10). Amendments were made accordingly, and the questionnaire was distributed in the case study school.

At the point that the questionnaires were distributed, the researcher met with the LSAs to introduce themselves and to explain the purpose of the study and their potential involvement in it. Crucial to a study based on gaining perspectives of others is providing an opportunity for the potential participants to interact and present themselves. Defined by Comstock (2013), “interaction” in research includes any “occasion when the researcher and subject communicate” (pg 170); the significance of this becomes clear as it highlights the need for trust between the researcher and the participant. This is further supported with reference to the interviews where trust between two people needs to be earned and you need to appear “trusting to the other person” (Richardson, 1996 pg 177). Given the nature of the research and the role the participant plays, it has been imperative that the

researcher has shown a level of respect for the participants and proved that they can be trusted with the information provided by the participants.

A distinct advantage to the researcher presenting to the LSAs was providing the LSAs with an opportunity to ask questions to further inform their decision to participate (Bell, 2005). In addition, for those LSAs participating in the interviews it meant the interview was not the first encounter they had with the researcher. A key priority of the study was gaining the support of the senior leaders to show that they were supportive of the study and that by participating the LSAs and teachers would feel reassured that it would not affect their role in the school.

Initially, the researcher did not receive the desired number of responses to the questionnaire and interview participation. Factors for this included a lack of interest in the study; lack of confidence in the system of anonymity; apprehension as to how valuable their contribution to the study was, or; potential shortcomings in their literacy competence. Therefore, the researcher had regular contact with the school offering to support LSAs in the completion of the questionnaires and making themselves available for discussions. Furthermore, the strategy known as 'snowball sampling' assisted in this process by LSAs sharing in their own experiences of participation.

Snowball sampling involves the researcher sampling a small group of participants who are then able to highlight or propose others who they feel might be relevant to the research (Bryman, 2012). The researcher encouraged participants to share in their experience with others as this was likely to overcome some potential anxieties that others might have had about taking part. The interaction that takes place in an interview affects the interviewee and was saturated with ethical complexities, which will be discussed further in Section 3.10. However, at this point of the data collection it was imperative that the researcher took these implications seriously when using strategies to obtain participation in the study (Kvale, 2007).

In much the same way, the teaching staff and SLT were offered an opportunity to take part in an interview. As a means of establishing a greater depth to the data that was collated from the questionnaires and interviews with the LSAs, some of the school's policies were analysed to explore how these are

implemented in practice, based upon the views of those working in the school. That is, to consider whether there is a true reflection of the opportunities and work ethic outlined in the policies and what this looks like in reality from the perspective of the staff working at the school.

Throughout the data collection process a number of issues were encountered by the researcher which posed challenges. The researcher felt there was reluctance to participate, particularly from the Learning Support Assistants. Each stage of the data collection, however, did obtain more participants and therefore can be concluded as a worthwhile strategy. The questionnaire numbers are much lower than anticipated, however they provided rich data from the anonymous insights that might not have been achieved through face to face interviews. An alternative method for individual interviews would be the use of focus groups. A focus group would focus on a particular theme or topic, and the researcher would be interested in the interactions between people as the discussion develops, particularly the way people respond to the views of other participants (Bryman, 2012). In hindsight, the use of focus groups could have acted as a strategy to gain more data, offering participants a choice of one-to-one interviews or to participate as part of a focus group. However, it was felt that individual interviews would allow people to be more honest and open in their answers. Discussions regarding the limitations of this research, however, will be discussed in Chapter 7: Conclusion.

### **3.8 Data Analysis**

Briefly touched upon in 'Section 3.4.1. Data Analysis from the Pilot Study', similar strategies were used to analyse the data received from the study. Traditional quantitative research is concerned with standardised data collection and statistical analysis (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Qualitative research is considered to be more complicated as it is based on the induction of the participants' own categories of meaning with the researcher developing criteria specifically for the paradigm, to establish credibility (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Cutcliffe and McKenna, 2002). However, this study is based upon an interpretivist paradigm meaning that there is little quantitative data analysis

present. The way the data were analysed will be explained in greater detail in the next two sections for the questionnaires and the interviews, describing the process and providing some examples.

### **3.8.1 Questionnaires**

Since each analysis, quantitative or qualitative, is of no greater or lesser importance than the other, their use being based upon the fitness for purpose, the questionnaires were analysed using mixed quantitative and qualitative method (Cohen, et al., 2011). Only questions within the questionnaire pertaining to a quantitative response were analysed in this way. The remainder of the questionnaire was analysed using content analysis, including coding of key themes, taking into account the context of these themes by interpreting the transcripts as a strategy for constructing meaning (Kvale, 2007).

Quantitative methods used for the purpose of this study and in analysing the responses from the closed questions in the questionnaires were presented in the form of frequency tables.

For the purpose of this study we will be concerned with using the data from the closed questions as 'statistics that describe' (Thomas, 2009). Within the context of this study the closed questions refer mostly to finding out how frequently the Learning Support Assistants are expected to carry out an element of their role. Within the data analysis these figures will often be represented as figures, placed in a table, interpreted accordingly and cross referenced with follow-up questions from the questionnaires or the information provided in interviews, drawing on qualitative data analysis strategies as well as the document analysis, where relevant.

With regard to the qualitative approach to data analysis, as mentioned the data were analysed using content analysis. It was defined by Krippendorff (2012) and has since become widely used in the social sciences in the late-Twentieth Century into the Twenty-First Century as a strategy to study the range of communicative media. It has since been used with greater influence to refer to written texts, as opposed to analysis of the spoken word (Thomas, 2009).

When engaging in content analysis, it is crucial to determine the categories of analysis; this refers to deciding whether the coding will be shaped around single words, the repetition of phrases or by extracting and interpreting from chunks of text. Whichever strategy is used, it was important for the researcher to be disciplined and logical (Davies, 2007). For the open ended questions in the questionnaire, the researcher went through each question systematically, highlighting key words associated with the question and creating a list of the responses given. These responses acted as a starting point for the researcher when preparing the interview schedule.

For example, when exploring how the LSAs feel with regard to their role, they all shared that they enjoyed their role to varying degrees, with none saying they did not enjoy their role. When asked to comment on what aspects of their role made it enjoyable, the researcher was able to examine key words such as 'staff' and 'children', then further scrutinize their context. One response provided both a positive and negative comment around the word 'staff', so it was crucial that the researcher took time to reflect upon the context of each expected key concept word – “working with staff who support each other. Some staff treating you with no respect” [quote from questionnaire]. Important here was a sign-post to the researcher to probe for further insight into this during the interviews, to unpick the meaning of this and understand which staff were being discussed. Further, it was an opportunity to understand whether this referred to staff generally or specific members of staff, but also to gauge whether this was something that was felt amongst the LSAs overall or perhaps by that one LSA only. This was also a consideration, particularly when referring back to other responses given for this question, as there was a whisper of mixed feelings towards senior leaders.

### **3.8.2 Interviews**

In terms of this research project, the researcher used the findings from the questionnaires, both the closed and open questions, as the basis for forming the interview schedule for the Learning Support Assistants, teachers and members of the Senior Leadership Team. The interviews varied in length from between 30 minutes to 50 minutes; this depended on the depth of discussion and interactions

between the researcher and the interviewee. From all levels of the interviews it was mixed in terms of whether the participant was familiar to the researcher, their experience in the school, and their role within the school (for example Grade 1, 2 or 3 LSAs). Due to this mix, it was felt that it would not have been beneficial to fully analyse the impact this had on the findings.

Qualitative researchers should use criteria developed specifically for their findings to be credible which differs significantly from the state of knowing within the quantitative paradigm where findings stem from experiments that test hypotheses (Leininger, 1992; Cutliffe and McKenna, 2002). Presenting findings to the respondents and seeking confirmation as to whether they agree, or disagree, acts as a strategy for verification of interpretation; or by seeking evaluation of data (Nolan and Behi, 1995; Golafshani, 2003). Therefore, within the interviews the researcher spent time within each of the three key concepts of this study clarifying and confirming responses provided by participants of the questionnaire. In particular, with the interviews held with the teachers and senior leaders, it was a priority for the researcher to gain a different perspective of the same issues presented from the questionnaires and interviews with LSAs.

Similarly, to the questionnaires, the interviews were analysed using content analysis of the transcripts. The transcripts were scrutinised by the researcher, who coded the responses based upon key themes that emerged. As transcripts can have multiple meanings revealed through multiple readings or interpretations, with meaning being particularly personable and context driven the researcher was careful to code in such a way as to create meaningful categories (Cohen, et al., 2011). Coding and themes used during the analysis of the data will be outlined in Chapters 4-5. Examples of the themes that emerged from the analysis included professional integrity, training opportunities, high expectations and value and respect and a sample of an analysed transcript can be found in Appendix 7.

### **3.9 Reliability, Validity and Quality**

Reliability in research has been argued to be more pertinent to quantitative research rather than to interpretivist research on the basis that this research is

about the researcher interpreting from their viewpoint. Therefore, it would not be expected for someone else to make all the same interpretations of the same information (Thomas, 2009). But, what is reliability? It refers to the ability to repeat a test using the same measures to gain the same results and whether it does so consistently, and to determine how trustworthy the results are (Bryman, 2012; Cutcliffe and McKenna, 2002). With regards to interviews and their reliability, this can refer to the consistency and trustworthiness of the interview (Kvale, 2007). Kvale (2007) questions whether an interviewee would give the same or different answers to another interviewer? Since much of these concerns regarding reliability in this context cannot be answered, it can be assumed that in the instance of this case study the issue of reliability lies within the researcher's own competence and interpretation of data collected and ensuring that data were collected and analysed in a rigorous and transparent way.

The validity of the research has been deemed as the most important criterion in research by Bryman (2012), who explores whether it is concerned with the "integrity of the conclusions" (pg 47). Questioning the validity of a piece of research involves the truth and strength of a statement. In other words, does the research investigate what it has pertained to investigate? (Kvale, 2007). Pertinent to this study is ecological validity, which focuses on whether the opinions, values and attitudes of the participants have been captured in the research (Flick, 2009) and it is important to take into account as many factors in a given situation as possible within the context of the real-world (Cohen, et al., 2011). Within this study, this is important as it allows the researcher to record true behaviour throughout the interviews making the results more meaningful.

Taking this into account, the positionality of the researcher remains a key element to validity and in turn the quality of the data that has been collected. The notion of positionality refers to an assumption that knowledge is situated within the relationship between people (Thomas, 2009) and that the researcher is central to the interpretation of data.

There is an inherent understanding that the researcher's biography is told and made explicit in the research process. This reflects upon the nature of the relationship between researcher and participant (Thomas, 2009). It is therefore

implicit that the researcher must accept their own subjectivity as they have influence over the questions posed, the structure of the interview and the interpretation of the transcripts.

During the research process the researcher must consider their personal opinion of the themes emerging from the data and acknowledge that their potential bias or subjectivity may bring new dimensions to the research. As such, having several interpretations of the transcripts can be seen as a strong point, rather than a weakness (Kvale, 2007). There is privilege in human interactions and non-verbal communication is an important element of interviews; entirely removing the researcher's subjectivity would be to take away aspects of the interactions (Acker, et al., 1983; Kvale, 2007).

The case study comprises different methods of data collection, yet overall, the quality of the study relied on the researcher's ability to engage with the participants and examine their personal reflections and perspectives of their role to include ecological validity and enhance the integrity of conclusions made from the analysis of data.

The participants of the questionnaires, and the interviews (this includes LSAs, teachers and senior leaders) all volunteered for the research. At each stage of the data collection, that is from the initial meeting with staff to the point of interviews, the researcher explained that any participation in the study would be kept confidential. This meant that any participation would be known only to the participant and researcher, meaning that any written data or audio recordings would remain anonymous to anyone outside of the research (Cohen, et al., 2011). By ensuring this confidentiality between the researcher and the participant and reassurance during the interview that their participation in the study relied upon their confidence in the process and that reporting honesty was paramount, it is believed that the participants were able to report what they feel. Further, the researcher took into account the context of the study and allowed each participant to arrange a time and location for the interviews to take place, but also given that participants volunteered it can be assumed that their participation is based upon them seeking this as an opportunity to share their own experiences and perspective. It cannot be guaranteed that each participant was honest;

however, data analysis reveals clear themes through the questionnaires and interviews suggesting shared experiences and perspectives.

The quality of the data in this case study reflects upon the researcher's ability to analyse the data, alongside their understanding of the reliability and validity of the data. In this case study, the researcher has acknowledged the potential for bias and subjectivity but has used this to their advantage as they were extremely aware of their own views on the topics in question with a reflective mind-set. By the collection of data through questionnaires, interviews and a review of policies with clear reference to literature and keeping a critical attitude during the interview and data analysis stage, the researcher believes they have been able to achieve reliable, valid data that is of quality within the context of a case study (Bell, 2005).

### **3.10 Ethical Considerations**

When thinking about ethics in research, we are concerned with thinking about what is right and what is wrong, and what it means to act morally. It is possible that a researcher will encounter ethical dilemmas in their pursuit of truth and understanding, with such dilemmas arising from various situations that this should therefore be considered at each stage of the research (Cohen, et al., 2011). Clear guidance has been outlined with regards to ethical implications in educational research; this has been documented by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011). This document states that it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the correct procedures and protocol are adhered to during the research process.

This study involves the complexities of people working within the same environment. Through awareness of the potential impact the study may have upon the participants the researcher has been able to predict dilemmas in order to eliminate them, particularly with reference to accepting that the participants have rights (Davies, 2007). The use of questionnaires and interviews in this study has involved careful consideration of the need for confidentiality, informed consent, privacy, anonymity, identifying potential ethical dilemmas and the role of the researcher. Both the use of questionnaires and interviews have similar

implications and considerations and therefore will be discussed simultaneously whilst each of these ethical considerations are addressed.

### **3.10.1 Confidentiality, anonymity and privacy**

Considered to raise particular difficulties for many forms of qualitative research, compared to quantitative research, the issue of confidentiality, anonymity and privacy need to be subject to careful reflection with regard to possible identification (Comstock, 2013). This is as a result of the human interaction and involvement associated with qualitative research.

Each of the participants had a right to have their privacy, anonymity and confidentiality upheld throughout the research process and in any future publications of the data collected. The BERA guidelines state that “the confidentiality and anonymous treatment of participants’ data is considered the norm for conduct of research” (BERA, 2011, pg 7), meaning that it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure this occurs, detailing to the participants how this will be achieved. Further, the researcher was required to comply with legal requirements in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 with regard to the storage and use of personal data.

In terms of this research project, it was important to adhere to these guidelines as a means of protecting the participant from encountering harm or being put at risk. In terms of research, confidentiality implies that any private data that may identify the participants will not be recounted as the participants have a right to privacy (Kvale, 2007).

Participants were not expected to provide their name or details when completing the questionnaire, making their participation anonymous and confidential. For the interviews, however, where the researcher contacted them directly and therefore knew who had taken part, as well as taking an audio recording, the researcher was required to take necessary action to ensure that others could not identify the participants. Prior to the interview, the researcher made each participant aware of the meaning of confidentiality and that the participants would remain

anonymous to everyone outside of the interview as they were no longer anonymous to the interviewer (Cohen, et al., 2011).

To adhere to legislation and ensure confidence for the participants, the audio recording and transcripts have been kept on an encrypted USB memory stick, with the researcher being the only person who had access to it. Further, the names of participants have been altered, given pseudonyms or deleted as appropriate. The nature of this research lends for others to be named in the interview process; the researcher has adhered to their right to privacy by omitting identifiers in the same way as they have for those who have participated. Further intrinsic precautions needed to be made during qualitative research interviews, particularly when statements from an interview may be published in a public report. In this way the anonymity and confidentiality of individuals who have participated in the study was secured (Thomas, 2011).

Caution has been placed upon certain instances whereby it is difficult to completely promise anonymity to a person. For the purposes of this study, the head teacher of the school will be identifiable, but only in that there is only one head teacher. However, their anonymity will be kept up to the point whereby the school that they are head teacher of will not be identifiable. The head teacher was made aware of this limitation and, wherever possible, referred to as part of the senior leaders rather than as an individual, as a matter of respect and courtesy.

### **3.10.2 Informed Consent**

This project was centred on the perspectives of individuals with regard to their work environment and, whilst the participants had a choice about whether they wished to take part in the study, the researcher took time to fully consider the impact of individual participation and the effect the study would have on the school. Therefore, a reflection of the ethical considerations involved is integral to this study (Thomas, 2009).

The principles of the guidelines set out by BERA include ensuring that the research is conducted within an ethic of respect for the person; knowledge;

democratic values; the quality of educational research; and academic freedom with a particular responsibility to the participants in the example of this study (BERA, 2011). Further considerations include possible risks that the research could affect participants or others by causing psychological or physical harm to them; damaging their reputation; infringing on their privacy; breaking the law or harming the community (Thomas, 2009).

For the methods used in this study, informed consent is crucial as this allows for the participant to make an informed decision about their participation in the study and to what extent they feel confident and comfortable to participate.

Informed consent is particularly important if participants are going to be exposed to stress, invasion of privacy, pain or could lose control over what happens; the researcher therefore ensured that participants were fully informed of the possible dangers or consequences (Frankfort-Nachimias and Nachmias, 1992). Defined as a procedure whereby an individual is able to choose whether to participate in the study once given all possible factors that may influence their decision, informed consent is a crucial element of this study (Diener and Crandall, 1978).

Informed consent consists of highlighting the potential risks and benefits to the participants (Comstock, 2013). Guidelines from BERA (2011) clearly state that the researcher must ensure that all participants understand the process including why their participation is necessary; how it will be used; and to whom it will be reported. The information presented to participants should be clear and concise yet include all relevant information regarding the study, to allow for participants to make an informed decision about whether they want to take part (Thomas, 2009). Included in this should be details about the expected benefits of taking part and an 'opt out' option should participants choose to withdraw from the study (Davies, 2007).

For this study, the LSA participants were informed in a whole cohort meeting where the researcher outlined the study, its purpose and why their involvement was important to the study. Further, this information was detailed on the questionnaire that was distributed; a copy of this can be found in Appendix 1. Additionally, all participants taking part in the interviews were provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the study, how the researcher will take

into account their rights to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality as well as requesting permission to be audio recorded. This can be found in Appendix 2.

### **3.10.3 Ethical Dilemmas**

The pilot study raised several opportunities for the researcher to consider the ethical implications and impact of the study upon the participants and the potential influence the findings could have had on the school (Thomas, 2009). These concerns were highlighted as part of the application for ethics approval for the study to take place.

A key factor for consideration from the researcher lies in the fact that the researcher was a familiar person to a significant number of potential participants. The implications of this are two-fold for the participants: where the researcher is a known person, the participants may feel more confident and comfortable to speak openly and take part in the study; however, it could have the opposite effect and make the participants feel tense about discussing their perspective openly and honestly. It was decided by the researcher that, given there was a 50 per cent chance that the researcher was known to potential participants, it would be possible to collect sufficient data to overcome the above implications.

A further factor to consider, however, was that the researcher had prior knowledge of the setting from their own experience of working there as a teacher. Whilst this had the potential to be influential during the analysis of responses given by the participants, the use of mixed methods to collect data acted as a buffer, with the interviews in particular acting as a way to clarify any misinterpretations. However, the familiarity the researcher had with the setting and participants meant that the researcher had some understanding of the perspective of the participants and this provided valuable insight into the study, with it being important to the researcher that the participants felt understood. During the research process the researcher ensured that they took opportunities to clarify any statements or phrases that could have been misunderstood during analysis by the researcher's misinterpretation.

As far as research is concerned, when using participants as part of the study careful consideration needs to be taken with regard to potential ethical dilemmas (Bryman, 2012). This is particularly prevalent in terms of ensuring that no harm comes to participants, whether it be physical, stress, loss of self-esteem, because of their participation in the study. The researcher took precautions and, along each stage of their research, reflected upon potential ethical dilemmas that could have occurred, taking necessary action to eliminate or at least minimise the risk to themselves and the participants (Cohen, et al., 2011). At each stage of the research it was crucial that the researcher provided the participants with all the necessary information to enable them to make an informed decision regarding their participation. This is in accordance with the BERA (2011) guidelines and in the case of this research project, it has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee, with a favourable ethical opinion for conduct being given (Appendix 8).

### **3.11 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to explore the paradigm rationale and approach of the study, to introduce the context of the school and to explain how and why participants were chosen. Further, how data were collected and analysed was discussed and the reliability, validity and quality of the data reflected upon. Ethical issues and limitations within the context of this study have also been considered.

The research design for this study was to shape a case study based upon the collection of data through questionnaires, interviews and an examination of school policies in conjunction with the literature review. With the main aim of this case study being to explore the professional identities of individuals, with a focus on Learning Support Assistants, who work in a special school in England, this project heavily sought the involvement of participants under the interpretivist paradigm.

With this in mind, the strengths and weaknesses of this paradigm were outlined, taking into careful consideration the positionality of the researcher. Justification of the validity of this paradigm lie within the inherent purpose of the study to better

understand the perception of individuals on the concepts of professional identity, continuing professional development and organisational culture.

The use of interviews as a key method of data collection, alongside the use of questionnaires, acts as a means for the researcher to engage with the participants on a personal, or human, level, to understand their world (Kvale, 2007). The construction of the social world is based upon the experiences of the individual; the interviewer wanted to draw out these experiences from the participant through the interpretation of these interactions (Bryman, 2012). The strengths and limitations of methods have been explored, including an evaluation of alternative data collection methods that may have proved beneficial to this study. The use of observations for this study, it was felt, would prove challenging, particularly with regard to consent from all adults working in the classroom, and the nature of consent required from parents to observe the pupils; as well as the potential influence reluctant participants may have had upon the data collected.

Imperative to this study, for the researcher, is their ability to recognise the subjective nature of the project in their search for truth (Acker, et al., 1983). Whilst objectivity is often desirable in research, with the researcher acting without bias, that is, to remove their position from the process, this is not the case for the purpose of this study. This study takes into account 'interviewer effects', with the use of questionnaires and interviews as a way of counterbalancing any potential bias (Kvale, 2007).

Further, Thomas (2011) has argued that it is not necessary for a case study to be generalised. In terms of research, the strengths and pitfalls of questionnaires and interviews have been discussed as key features of data collection that shape the case study. The ethical implications of this type of research have highlighted the potential dilemmas that the researcher may have faced during data collection, and as a result necessary precautions were taken to ensure that the anonymity, confidentiality and privacy of the participants have been clearly explained (Bryman, 2012; Cohen, et al., 2011; Thomas, 2009).

# Chapter Four – Results and Analysis 1: LSA Questionnaire and Interviews

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## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter will focus on the qualitative and quantitative data from the Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), following a detailed analysis from the questionnaires and interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to unpick some of the comments and feelings presented within the questionnaires and draw focused discussions around these issues. The interviews took place on a one to one basis. The researcher was able to scribe some comments related to expressions and tone of voice used by the interviewee in response to the questions. This enabled the researcher to gain a more personal perspective from the LSA and structure the interview in an attempt to ensure that the interviewee felt respected and could trust the researcher with the information they were sharing.

From a possible 35 LSAs currently working both full and part time in the school, eleven questionnaires were completed. Following ethical consent and scrutiny of the questionnaire responses from the LSAs, a series of interviews took place with 6 LSAs. It was hoped that there would have been a better response to the questionnaires, with participant numbers being smaller than hoped as outlined in Section 3.7. However, given the data that has been collected, the aim is to shed light on the issues by comparing and contrasting both data sets from the LSAs (that is from the questionnaires and interviews). Together, this will present a 'rich description' of the respondents' perceptions and experiences within the school.

Pertinent school policies were analysed with reference to the three core concepts of this study; these will be referred to as appropriate in line with the analysis of data from the questionnaires and interviews. Questionnaires were analysed, and content analysis was used as a way of understanding meaning from the transcripts (Krippendorff, 2012). Both the questionnaires and transcripts from the interviews will involve researcher interpretation. Due to the nature of this study

and the qualitative, interpretivist paradigm the process of data analysis will demonstrate an element of the researcher's own ontological positionality within research (Thomas, 2009). All names have been changed to protect participants' identity.

## 4.2 Themes

Whilst the questionnaires were divided into four sections, starting with gaining some information and background about the person completing the questionnaire, leading onto professional identities, to continuing professional development (CPD), and ending with questions relating to organisational culture; there are several themes that were evident from the interview transcripts. These themes surround the three core concepts and upon reading the transcripts and analysing the data, the following themes emerged:

1. Qualification and Experience – background of LSAs
2. Professional integrity
3. Sharing professional knowledge
4. Value and respect – within class teams and as a whole organisational culture
5. Communication – Senior Leadership Team and teachers
6. Training opportunities
7. High expectations from SLT regardless of training / experience

***Figure 4.1: Themes emerging from questionnaires and LSA interviews***

Therefore, during this results chapter both the LSA questionnaires and interviews will be analysed, with reference to these themes linking back to the three key concepts – professional identity; continuing professional development; and organisational culture, and drawing on relevant school policies. A closer inspection of data from the questionnaires and the interviews unpicks any patterns and relationships between the role of the assistant as indicated by their grade and the responses given. These are discussed in further detail throughout this chapter, as appropriate.

## Theme 1: Qualifications and Experience

The first few questions in the questionnaire aimed to gain a little background to the LSAs. The purpose of this was to examine the breadth of their knowledge and determine if there was a correlation between the qualifications they have and their “Grade”. The tables below show some key information provided by the LSAs regarding the number of years’ experience they have and their qualifications.

Number of years’ experience as an LSA	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Higher Level Teaching Assistant
Less than a year				
1 – 2 years	1			
3 – 5 years			1	
Over 5 years	1	4	4	

**Table 4.1: Table to show number of years’ experience and Grade in current school as an LSA**

Qualifications	Total
GCSEs	5
A-Levels	1
O-Levels	1
NVQ	5
BTEC	1
City and Guilds	1
Higher Education	0
Other: Apprenticeship	

**Table 4.2: Table to show qualifications of LSAs**

List of other qualifications achieved by LSAs:

- Makaton Foundation Level
- PECS
- Basic First Aid
- Shallow Water
- Smile Level 1
- Gastrostomy Feeding
- Epilepsy – Emergency Medicine training
- Manual Handling
- MIDAS
- Team Teach

**Figure 4.2: List of school based qualifications**

Interestingly, the first three questions from the questionnaires showed that there does not appear to be a direct link between the number of years an LSA has worked in the school and their Grade. When looking at National Qualifications, which includes Level 3 to Level 8, the data revealed there was a mixed level to which the LSAs had achieved. The highest level of qualifications recorded were BTECs, A-Levels and NVQs, although it was not stated which level NVQ they had achieved. This suggests there is no standard entry level expectation for LSAs entering the role, unlike teachers who must have achieved Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). There appears to be no trend between the educational attainment of an LSA and their current grade within the school.

The data from the LSAs regarding qualifications and experiences reveals the importance for LSAs of undergoing skills-based training to enable them to be successful in their role. Initial thoughts on this show the beginnings of a model of CPD presented by the school and acts as a starting point in this study to unlocking the way in which the LSAs are perceived as professionals by senior leaders.

LSA	Emily	Joanne	Olivia	Caroline	Lily	Sophia
Years of experience in role	19	8	6	3	15	12
Grade	3	1	2	1	3	3

**Table 4.3: Table to show years of experience and grade for LSAs from interviews**

The information provided by the LSAs during the interviews also suggested a range in the amount of years the LSAs had worked in the role, and the grading of the LSA. For example, Joanne has 8 years' experience, and is a Grade 1; whilst Olivia who has 6 years' experience is a Grade 2. This shows that the Grade of the LSA is not linked to the numbers of years' experience they have. This is not surprising, and Emily was able to confirm her range of qualifications to be no higher than college level pre-her entering the role, and qualifications she has achieved since starting in the role are school based training such as Manual Handling, Team Teach and Makaton. During all the interviews this was echoed with LSAs highlighting that these school-based skills to be valuable and central to their role, placing importance on them in their role, as a teacher might to their teaching qualification.

When examining relevant policies such as The Performance Management Policy and CPD Policy, evidence suggests that the school is committed to the development of knowledge, skills, experience and attitudes of the staff on a basis that is beneficial to all. For example, new staff have the opportunity to identify training needs as part of their induction [taken from CPD Policy for the school] and that the school's performance management process is designed to ensure that all employees have the skills and support they need to carry out their role effectively [taken from the Performance Management Policy for the school]. This is reflected in the data collected, demonstrating that it is integral to the school that there is a baseline of training and opportunities in place to support the staff in developing their skills and knowledge.

## Theme 2: Professional Integrity

The second key theme that emerged from the questionnaires and interview data is professional integrity. Looking at the qualities embedded within professionalism, the LSAs were asked in the questionnaire to consider the qualities they felt defined them as a professional, reflecting on how strongly they agreed, or disagreed with the statements.

Quality	Strongly agree / Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree / Strongly disagree
Shared working ethic – working alongside the Senior Leadership Team	6	4	1
Ability to be flexible and adaptable	9	2	
Accept responsibility for your actions / decisions	10	1	
Use appropriate and correct language at all times (both verbally and written)	10	1	
Work reflectively, including accepting critical feedback	10	1	
Treat colleagues (in whatever capacity) with respect	9	2	
Undertake training which enables you to be successful in your role	9	2	

**Table 4.4: Table to show the qualities that the LSAs feel define them as a professional**

The questionnaires revealed clearly defined agreement to which qualities the LSAs felt they had in their professional role, where interestingly the response with a mixed agreement referred to the shared working ethic with the Senior Leadership Team. As developed within the interviews, this is not surprising and, despite this mixed feeling there remains a sense of professionalism amongst the LSAs as described by the LSAs themselves to “feel that I do it [the role] in a professional manner” [Emily] and “I see myself as a professional” [Caroline]. With regards to the qualities the LSAs felt defined them as a professional, the questionnaires revealed that those working as a Grade 1, with one of these two

LSAs working in the school for between one and two years, revealed that they had less strong opinions about their views on professionalism and what defines them as a professional. An explanation for this could be that, having limited years' experience in the role, the LSA remains in the *novice* stage of the development of their professional identity and that they are yet to develop themselves fully as a professional.

Many of the other qualities possessed by the LSAs, however, had very similar results indicating that many of them either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they defined them as professionals. Drawing back to the shared working ethic, perhaps the LSAs draw upon their own sense of professionalism even though they may not share the ethic of their leaders by displaying professionalism through many other qualities such as respecting colleagues, taking responsibility for their actions, being flexible, and using appropriate and professional language. Within this, the LSAs demonstrate professional integrity, as they are able to present themselves with those qualities in their role.

When asked if the LSAs believe it to be possible to separate their personal life or relationships from their working relationships during their working day, 6 of the 11 participants in the questionnaires agreed. A further 4 participants felt that mostly this was achievable with only one stating that 'at times' they believed it to be possible. The response from this seems to reflect the professional understanding and nature of the LSAs. The interpretation of this shows they have a strong sense of professionalism, that they value it and that the respondents have at least begun to form their own professional identity.

Comments made on the questionnaires support the idea that the LSAs have developed professional integrity in their role, with one LSA stating that they believe in "finding the professional / personal line and making sure it is not crossed by either party" [quote from questionnaire], with reference to the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders.

The idea of professional integrity is corroborated by the LSAs in the interviews, with particular regard to the decision the LSAs have made about their own professional identity in the school. There was a strong sense of knowing and of understanding the value of maintaining professionalism within the role. When

asked about how they are able to deal with difficult situations arising, or conflicts with colleagues whereby they put personal relationships to one side, they were able to give examples of prioritising their work ethic and morals before friendships sharing a sense of loyalty in their role in the school.

In the following example, Emily demonstrates her loyalty within her role, even when faced with challenges towards her peers:

“I would have to be professional about it and know what the morals are... It’s very hard to do and I would hate it, but I would” [Emily]

Emily’s sense of morality in this example suggests that she understands her position in the school and the principles between right and wrong in relation to her conduct. Her moral purpose therefore, is with her commitment to the school, over her personal relationships with her colleagues.

In subsequent interviews, this theme continued to be reinforced, as another LSA [Sophia] described her experience of moving to a different class to work and how her colleagues were initially not happy with the change and were hostile towards her.

“I didn’t confront them... I spoke to them as I would with anyone.... I stayed professional” [Sophia]

From the interviews, it became clear that the LSAs perceive themselves as being able to act professionally. Further insight from the interviews supports this professional understanding and how it has been acquired by the LSAs.

Thinking closely about the qualities that the LSAs feel define them as professionals, in the interviews there was a strong sense of moral purpose and a clear response to understanding their own role where Emily stated:

“I carry out my job to the best of my ability in aspects of teaching... I’ve been doing it for such a long time now I understand what I’m being asked to do” [Emily]

Most interesting from the questionnaires, was the LSAs' mixed response to their position as a professional and having a shared working ethic, particularly with the Senior Leadership Team.

“I don't think we're as important [as SLT] I know we haven't all got degrees in teaching ... but I feel it has got worse over the last 3 or 4 years” [Joanne]

Mixed relationships between the LSAs and senior leaders came across early on in the interviews, where both Lily and Emily spoke of examples where they understood their role, and believed they were skilled to carry out their role well, but did not have the same professional respect between the LSAs and members of SLT.

“It makes you feel not as worthy” [Lily]

“I get on well with SLT ... but the circle is broken in the team because SLT have moved out of it” [Emily]

The opinions of Emily and Lily demonstrate differences in how they, as LSAs, feel their position is within the organisational culture and their interpretation of how they perceive the professional integrity of senior leaders. Overall, with point of reference to professional integrity, there is a strong sense of mutual agreement amongst the LSAs that acting professionally and being a professional is part of their role. The Staff Code of Conduct policy outlines clear guidelines detailing mutual understanding that working with children brings its own responsibilities and challenges and that all staff are in a position of trust. The policy refers to the way that the staff conduct themselves professionally with their colleagues, the children, parents (and carers) and visitors to the school, the message of which appears to be clearly interpreted by the LSAs in their role to work together to achieve. Key language used throughout the policy highlights the school's ethos to embed professionalism throughout the school, with expectations of conduct being held of all staff, students and volunteers. Language includes phrasings such as “courtesy and respect”; “behaviour should reflect professionalism”; “present themselves as good role models” (Staff Code of Conduct Policy). The wording within the policy is phrased so as to ensure all staff are able to believe

in themselves to be a professional and conduct themselves professionally within their role in the school.

The way in which the respondents have been able to develop these professional identities will be further examined throughout the questionnaires and interviews; and then compared with the perceptions of the teachers and senior leaders during the analysis of this data (see Chapter 5).

### **Theme 3: Sharing professional knowledge**

This level of professional integrity also has merits with the LSAs describing how they have been able to share professional knowledge amongst themselves. It is evident throughout the questionnaires that there is a strong sense of confidence and moral purpose amongst the LSAs in gaining professional knowledge and working together to support each other. Fundamentally, the primary method of acquiring professional knowledge for the LSAs was through experience and opportunity; this includes meetings and training with their colleagues, as well as outside agencies and courses.

<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Number of LSAs</b>
Never	0
Once or twice a year	0
Once or twice a term	2
Once a week or more	1
Every week	6
Other: 5-10 times a term; if they need to consult with outside agency	2

**Table 4.5: Table to show how often the LSAs consult with outside agencies**

The nature of these consultations refers to feedback on a child they are working with, whether this is for medical, physiotherapy, social, speech therapy or sensory processing and how they can implement plans in the classroom environment. One LSA, in the questionnaire, was able to discuss their specific role, detailing frequent meetings they have with agencies to offer family support and guidance through the School Home Integrated Project (SHIP). Examining more closely the relationship between the frequency with which the LSAs consult with outside agencies and the concept of professional identities, it appears that

the LSAs and their professionalism is trusted by the teaching staff, and senior leaders, to engage with other professionals in dialogue about the children they work with:

“It’s something I’ve always done within my role; I’ve always spoken to the professionals to support the pupils” [Emily]

“I was trained [to work with a specific pupil] with the speech and language therapist, the physios and OTs.... I go to the inter-agency meetings... and we discuss certain things...” [Joanne]

In both of these examples, the LSAs speak of how they, in their role have been able to gain professional knowledge from their colleagues to support them in their role. This indicates a strategy for developing professional knowledge from other professionals in addition to the teachers, senior leaders and other LSAs in the school.

During the interviews, Lily shared her experience of leading the class in the absence of the teacher and strategies that she uses to support her colleagues to develop skills and confidence working in the classroom by:

“Show[ing] them how to do it and let[ting] them know I’m there to help” [Lily].

Olivia further shares her experiences of this, too, as she will:

“Always inform the other LSAs of the plans or what we are doing” [Olivia].

In relation to professional development opportunities, this reflects upon the ‘hands on’ experience the LSAs have of working together to develop skills and knowledge in their role and how they are supportive of each other to recognise the idea of having a sense of shared moral purpose amongst themselves.

A troubling insight was disclosed during the interview with Olivia, however, as she described her perception of the senior leaders. This suggests that perhaps SLT and the LSAs have mixed understanding of their role.

“SLT definitely want LSAs to be more of a teacher role than LSA.... I think they are now expecting LSAs to plan.... Some more than others

[Interviewer: Is that grade dependent?] Not always; it depends on the class or what kind of task you've taken on... Not everyone has the skills". [Olivia]

Yet this does not appear to be a trend, with evidence from Sophia suggesting the opposite to Olivia's position:

"I have very little input in the planning because the teachers have time out... they [teachers] may in a staff meeting say 'has anyone got any ideas how we can...?' ... but in the class I'm in now we don't do much of the planning". [Sophia]

Referring to the LSA's role profiles and qualities they are expected to bring to the role, details surrounding planning are vague, stating that LSAs are expected to "plan and carry out activities for specific pupils or groups of pupils" [taken from the LSA role profiles for the school – appendix 9]. It is impossible to determine an exact interpretation of this aspect of their role, and since SLT have not explicitly stated how they should be carried out, there will be continued discrepancies with how each teacher uses their LSA to support in this. What needs to be considered, is whether the teachers, or senior leaders, have provided the LSAs with sufficient opportunities to be successful in fulfilling this aspect of their role in the way that it has been interpreted. This does seem to have been taken into account as Olivia reveals "not everyone has the skills" and that some teachers do not expect the LSAs to do the planning, as stated by Sophia.

Scrutiny of the Performance Management Policy shows that the performance of all staff is taken seriously, with clear and consistent assessment of the performance of all employees including the head teacher, teachers and all support staff (LSAs, and Administrative staff). The policy details that the process of performance management will be supportive and developmental to ensure that all staff have sufficient skills to carry out their role effectively. Therefore, examination of the role profiles is key to understanding the expectations of the LSAs in their daily role. As the school currently employs no HTLAs (Higher Level Teaching Assistants) this role profile was not taken into consideration for this theme. However, discrepancies lie in the LSA role profiles for Grades 1, 2 and 3 and the expectation there is on them. Whilst phrasing and content in the role profiles is similar between the three profiles, there are fundamental differences

in the choices of working for the accountability statements which define the differences between the three levels of LSA. For example, words such as ‘help’ and ‘contribute’ are used amongst Grades 1 and 2, whilst language for a Grade 3 LSA lends for its own ambiguity and is open to interpretation including terms “contribute to and implement curriculum programmes”; and working with the teacher in lesson planning and “assuming whole class responsibility for teaching and learning”.

This issue reveals the need for further investigation from the teachers and the senior leaders about their understanding of the role the LSAs have and the responsibilities they have for tasks such as planning. If they are expected to plan activities, then it is crucial that they are given the tools to do so by being provided with adequate training to develop the skills and knowledge required to plan. It seems that clearer guidelines need to be put in place to confirm the level to which the LSAs are expected to perform, with and without support from the teachers, and to what extent it is their responsibility to share their expertise and knowledge.

#### **Theme 4: Value and Respect**

In terms of professional identities, there is evidence to suggest some inconsistencies in the responses from the LSAs and school policies. The LSAs’ viewpoint demonstrates a difference between their involvement in whole school approaches and strategies in terms of value and respect.

In the questionnaire, the LSAs were asked about their role in changes to policies and procedures to gauge how their opinions and views are valued by the Senior Leadership Team as well as to establish the LSAs’ position within the organisational culture of the school.

	<b>Are you kept up to date with changes in policies and procedures?</b>	<b>Are you given an opportunity to be involved in changes made to policies and procedures?</b>
Yes	5	2
Mostly	5	0
At times	1	3
No	0	6
When it is relevant to my role	0	0

**Table 4.6: Table to show the LSAs' involvement in policies and procedures**

Further elaboration to this in the questionnaires was explained by one LSA, who said “the policies and procedure documents are updated regularly ... staff are given a chance to read them regularly... we have little involvement in writing the policies” [taken from questionnaire]. Another LSA has a responsibility for keeping abreast of statutory changes to policies around behaviour and Team Teach, which is a National Training Award to support behaviour management. This evidence suggests that senior leaders, when they believe it to be relevant, do value the input from the LSAs into policies and procedures.

A key strength of the role of the senior leader, from the perspective of the LSAs is that they are effective in promoting a shared vision for the school. Unpicking these statements further reveals complex relationships between the LSAs and the senior leaders. Evidence suggests that whilst the LSAs may not have strong relationships with the senior leaders, they are able to clearly define the role of SLT and have respect for the position that the senior leaders hold in the school. However, in some instances the LSAs do not always agree with the senior leaders. For example there is a more positive response recognising the positive effectiveness of the SLT, from the perspective of the LSAs than might have been expected given the complicated relationships between the LSAs and senior leaders. The following table demonstrates differences between the perceptions of the LSAs towards the effectiveness of the senior leaders.

<b>Key roles</b>	<b>Extremely / Very effective</b>	<b>Moderately effective</b>	<b>Slightly / Not at all effective</b>
Promoting a shared vision of the school ethos	5	4	2
Acting as a role model – leading by example	4	4	3
Managing the daily running of the school	6	3	2
Ensuring high standards of competency and conduct in the school	6	3	2
Supporting all staff in their professional development	4	3	4
Taking responsibility for the monitoring of high quality teaching and learning in the school	6	3	2
Implementing a school improvement plan in line with the school vision	6	3	2

**Table 4.7: Table to show the LSA’s views on the effectiveness of the Senior Leadership Team**

This question revealed a real mix in the perception of the LSAs about the senior leaders’ role in the school. The LSAs did not believe there to be any real shortcomings in the effectiveness of the senior leaders, but nor was there a strong sense of belief in them either. The responses in the questionnaires revealed that there was no relationship between the role the assistant has, as indicated by their Grade, and the response given towards their views on the effectiveness of the Leadership Team. Varying experiences from the LSAs with regard to developing professional relationships with SLT could play a part in these figures, as well as some LSAs comparing their previous experiences from their variable years in the role. For example, one LSA in their questionnaire, who reported to have over 19 years’ experience in the school, stated: “the ethos has changed” [quote from questionnaire] and although they did not stipulate how, they also felt the Senior Leadership Team is ‘moderately to very effective’ in their opinion. This suggests that, although change has taken place, this is not necessarily seen as having a negative impact.

In comparison, the LSAs commented upon their professional relationships with the teachers they work with and the role they have supporting the teacher. From

the LSAs that completed the questionnaire, there is a strong collaborative value to the role they have and significance of different aspects of their role.

“Treating me professionally and valuing my contributions” [response from questionnaire]

“[Teacher] listening to any concerns we may have and helping me with personal development [by challenging me]” [response from questionnaire]

The LSAs commented significantly more positively towards the teaching staff than they did towards the senior leaders. By the nature of the role of the LSA, they are invariably going to have a closer working relationship with the teacher and there is a strong feeling of mutual respect towards the teachers and wanting to support the teachers for the children. The role that senior leaders play upon the culture of the school is variable and from the responses given in the questionnaires, differences exist in terms of LSAs understanding of the role the SLT play and the effectiveness of the role.

The following aspects were determined from the LSA role profiles and apply to all the LSAs no matter their Grade. What was revealed by the LSAs is an understanding of the varied elements of their role, but also that these strands support the teacher, and that the role of the LSA is to support the teacher. The following table shows that the LSAs present high value upon each of these aspects, placing none of them with greater regard than another.

	<b>Very / Somewhat valuable</b>	<b>Valuable</b>	<b>Not / Not very valuable</b>
Working closely with the teacher to make pupil assessments	9	2	0
Working closely with the teacher to monitor and update behaviour plans	10	0	1
Working closely with the teacher to monitor and update care plans	10	1	0
Plan and carry out activities for specific pupils / groups of pupils	9	1	1

**Table 4.8: Table to show how valuable the LSAs feel these aspects of their role is in supporting the teacher**

When asked about how the teachers and senior leaders made them feel valued, the LSAs reported in the questionnaires that they were made to feel valued daily by their class teachers, and during school meetings by senior leaders. Whilst this difference may suggest that senior leaders value the LSAs less, it should also be noted, that it is far easier for teachers to pass on their value daily to the LSAs through the close daily working environment and during any daily debriefing that may occur. Senior leaders may not encounter all the LSAs on as regular a basis as the teachers.

How frequently are you made to feel valued by the class teacher?		How frequently are you made to feel valued by the Senior Leadership Team?	
Frequency	Number	Frequency	Number
Daily – as a team and individually	8	Regularly – a member of the leadership team will praise me personally	2
Weekly – during team meetings	3	Sometimes – during whole school meetings as a group but not individually	9
End of half terms	0	End of half terms	0
Once or twice a year	0	Once or twice a year	0

**Table 4.9: Table to show the frequency with which the LSAs are made to feel valued by teachers and SLT**

In the questionnaires, an LSA reported that “I have answered questions as at the present time. In the past some answers would be different”, whilst another stated “SLT are less likely to help with personal issues; they have in the past” as well as “the ethos of our school has changed in recent years. I would like the senior leadership to show more compassion to both families and staff”.

These comments offer insight into the way that the LSAs are feeling within the school culture and their position within the school. Drawing closely upon the use of words in these phrases in the questionnaires demonstrates a distinctive difference between how the LSAs wish to be treated and how they feel they are treated by SLT.

Questions arise as to whether any other concerns that have been raised by the LSAs can be rebutted by the senior leaders when they are offered an opportunity to engage in interviews and express their opinions and perspective of the role they have, and the valued role the LSAs have in their school. Further concerns currently felt by the LSAs include:

- LSA morale - related to sickness
- Respect from SLT
- Feel not working as a unit
- What they [SLT] say is final
- Communication
- Compassion
- Feel they [LSAs] are not important
- Pressure from Ofsted

**Figure 4.3: Concerns felt by LSAs**

A further divide amongst the LSAs in terms of their view of the value placed upon them by their colleagues became apparent when they were directly asked about this. This was supported by comments made by the LSAs during the interviews as they described and spoke more positively regarding the teacher they were working with.

During the interviews, the LSAs spoke about their understanding of how to model professional language and integrity. LSAs commented on how to act professionally in their role. When discussing value and respect, however, there was a clear divide in the way LSAs felt with regard to the whole school perspective and their class teams.

The divide lies where the LSAs reported mutual value and respect between themselves and the class teacher they were working with, but that this respect and value was not felt between the LSAs and the senior leaders:

“I feel bad because there are positive working relationships in the class, because you work together, but I don’t think SLT respect us. They think we can be easily replaced” [Caroline]

“I don’t think they [SLT] listen to your concerns.... They always say you can come and talk to us, but I don’t think people feel they can” [Sophia]

“Within our class team, communication with each other is the best part.... The school team is a different thing because each class I feel we are not working as one unit” [Emily]

Revealed here is a difference in the daily working relationships that the LSAs have with the class teacher and the senior leaders, and reflected through this is the divide in the feeling of value and respect. The LSAs and teachers work together daily as part of a close team and therefore the bond and understanding would be more developed than that of the relationship the LSAs have with the senior leaders who may not have daily contact with all members of staff.

This was examined further through discussions with the teaching staff and senior leaders to enable them to share their viewpoint and to establish a greater understanding within the context of the whole school culture (See Chapter 5: Results and Analysis 2: Teacher and Senior Leader Interviews).

Upon speaking with the LSAs in the interviews of perspective of the effectiveness of the senior leaders, it became apparent that there are some negative feelings towards the senior leaders evidenced through the phrasing and words chosen:

“I don’t think they [SLT] listen to your concerns, I don’t feel” [Sophia]

“It’s more them and us than it ever used to be [Interviewer: teachers and LSAs?] No, the three stages SLT, teachers then support staff. I think they [SLT] don’t think we’re as important whereas there used to be a bit more communication between everybody” [Joanne]

There appears to have been a change in the way that the senior leaders are perceived by the LSAs, something that shall be more closely examined through the interviews with the teachers and senior leaders, and that this has affected their perspective of the role the SLT have in the school. Whilst positive responses were given with regard to the effectiveness of SLT, demonstrating that LSAs do believe in the role the senior leaders have within the school, confusing

relationships remain between them which could account for the mixed feelings the LSAs have about the senior leaders.

The interpretation of Sophia's feelings towards senior leaders and Joanne's experience differs to Emily's as she claims to:

“Get on well with SLT because I've worked with them when they were teachers for many years... but I do know where the boundary is and that they are management”. [Emily]

Both Sophia and Joanne have similar feelings towards the SLT and this could explain the mixed responses towards the senior leaders' effectiveness in their role. Levels of hierarchy are inevitable within an establishment, therefore understanding the complexities of the hierarchy can help to appreciate differences in the senior leaders, teachers and LSAs within the organisational culture. The responsibility that each cohort has within that structure has an impact and discussions with the teachers and senior leaders regarding that structure was revealed during the interviews and explains a contrasting perspective on the same theme (See Chapter 5).

The LSAs further reflected the perception of value and respect that the teachers and the senior leaders presented towards the LSAs. To a large extent, the responses from the LSA perspective within a class team echoed the responses from the questionnaires whereby the LSAs felt appreciated by the teaching staff.

They all recounted the positive working relationships they have with each other as a group of LSAs, supporting and encouraging each other, as well as the positive relationship they have with their class teacher.

Comments from the LSAs that confirm a level of mutual value and respect include:

“Communication with each other is the best part; planning what we do throughout the day and carrying out that plan” [Emily]

“I've always been quite lucky to work with several teachers and I've always got on well with them. I've felt I can say 'how about this?'" [Lily]

These quotes show that the relationship that the LSAs have with the teachers is generally positive and that they have confidence to be open with them. They feel that their opinion is respected and that they are able to have a voice within the classroom. There is some feeling of 'unknown' from the perspective of the LSAs with working with some teachers. There is a strong sense of what is right and wrong from the LSAs and one LSA was able to share their view that they would have reservations working with a few teachers because of the way they treat the LSAs:

"There are some teachers in the school I wouldn't want to work with.... because of the way they are; the way they treat and talk to you. There's only a few" [Caroline]

This is replicated by another LSA describing how, when working with one teacher, they felt they did not have a voice in the class. Both Caroline and Olivia concluded that it is 'just the way they are', and that you need to maintain professional relationships:

"I think you have to be professional about it... I think it might have brought the class teams closer... and we support each other" [Olivia]

There is a difference, however, within the whole school culture compared to the culture of the classroom. Each of the LSAs describes distinct differences in their relationships with members of SLT, using some direct language:

"I don't think they listen to your concerns" [Sophia]

When asked to elaborate further on this point, Sophia shared her feelings about how she has been made to feel by SLT. Sophia was explicit in stating that from her point of view, there was not a lot of respect currently for SLT as a result of things that the LSAs have been told they are not allowed to do. This is paralleled by Joanne and Lily in their description of how they share their more recent experience of the senior leaders:

"The gap has got bigger [between LSAs and SLT] and the communication has got worse over the last 3 or 4 years" [Joanne]

“They [SLT] say communication is important in the school but something big happens and we don’t know about it but other people do but it makes you feel not as worthy.” [Lily]

Mixed feelings were presented by Joanne and Lily towards SLT, although it appears that the senior leaders were unaware of this. In her interview, Lily has claimed that SLT believe communication to be important, however her perspective is that this is not portrayed in reality. At this point, it is not clear if senior leaders were aware of this confusion, or whether senior leaders’ idea of communication differs to that of the LSAs. For example, is the expected level of communication from the LSAs higher than what the senior leaders believe it should be?

The LSAs were able to share in their personal experiences of negative feelings towards the Senior Leadership Team. Whilst this demonstrated a level of trust between the researcher and the interviewee, it is unfortunate for the SLT to be represented in this way. One LSA was able to express that, despite having a positive relationship with members of SLT from her experiences of working with them in their role as a class teacher, here is a boundary and SLT have made it clear that their say is final. She continues, “The circle in the team is broken because SLT have moved out of it” [Emily].

It is perceived that the LSAs are not feeling part of the whole school organisation with further comments:

“They don’t think we’re as important” [Joanne]

“If one goes... we’ll just get someone to replace you” [Sophia]

“It’s very much do as I say. That’s how it’s done” [Caroline]

This suggests that there may be an assumption that the LSAs feel under-valued and this has changed the way the LSAs perceive themselves as professionals. These concerns have been investigated further through the interviews with teachers and members of the Senior Leadership Team, where they have an opportunity to discuss their viewpoint and their perception of these issues can be

debated to gain a deeper insight into the organisational culture of the school (See Chapter 5: Theme 3: Value and Respect).

## Theme 5: Communication

The theme of communication shone through in the questionnaires and interviews. Within the context of this thesis, “communication” refers to the way in which individuals or groups of people communicate with each other and the frequency with which this professional dialogue occurs (Glatthorn, 1987). The significance of this has relevance to the professional status that the LSAs hold and the roles and responsibilities they have within this status. For example, the purpose of examining the amount the LSAs liaise with parents acts as a stepping stone to establish the extent to which the LSAs carry out responsibilities replicating that of the teacher and the nature of these responsibilities. The LSAs have stated that, in their opinion, the level of communication they receive from senior leaders is not sufficient. By unpicking this in greater depth, including examining the communication between staff and parents, and between parents and teachers and by considering what the expectations of LSAs are with regard to communication could offer a more detailed understanding of this theme.

Type of communication / Frequency	Never	Once a year	Once or twice a term	At least once a week
Written (reports, home school diary)				5
Verbal (parents evening, open afternoons)		1		4
Verbal (telephone conversations; drop off / collection of pupil)				10
Other				2

**Table 4.10: Table to show the capacity and frequency with which the LSAs liaise with parents / carers about progress**

The purpose of examining the frequency of the type, and frequency of communication, between LSAs and parents (and carers) was to understand another strand to their role. Trust and professionalism between the LSAs and teachers would determine the frequency with which the LSAs liaise with parents

and carers. What can be seen is that all of the LSAs who completed the questionnaires have some contact with the parents. The frequency may be inconsistent, but other factors are likely to determine this. The point assumed therefore is that the LSAs are trusted in their professionalism to converse with the parents and carers about pupil progress, mostly on a regular basis.

Two of the LSAs divulged further information about this point with regard to the nature of their contact with parents and carers. One LSA stated in their questionnaire that it:

“Depends a lot on which class – Early Years tend to have more verbal contact with parents” [quote from questionnaire]

And therefore was more verbal contact, than written contact. Another LSA described their specific role in the school meaning they liaised with parents or carers weekly for “family support, meetings, SHIP work and safeguarding” [quote from questionnaire]. Relating back to the idea of professionalism, the teaching staff present a shared understanding that the LSAs are able to act professionally and provide a professional dialogue with parents and carers on a regular basis.

Feelings of lack of respect and value were emulated through the theme of communication, from the perspective of the LSAs and senior leaders with a particular emphasis on the LSAs feeling as though they have been involved in some issues but also feeling as though the frequency of communication is variable. Thinking about the LSAs’ well-being and the development of their professional identities, the lack of respect and value felt by them by senior leaders has resulted in ill-feeling, particularly with regard to how they believe they fit within the organisational culture of the school. They feel they are not fully integrated into the organisational culture.

An example of this was shown when Joanne spoke of an occasion when the teacher was absent from school and she covered the role. For this Joanne led the teaching and learning in the classroom, and whilst she was “happy to do it” [Joanne], she felt that “no one from Senior Management came down the whole week to see if there were any problems... I had to go to them” [Joanne]

She continued: “I had to seek another teacher to find out what was happening from the meetings rather than being told” [Joanne]

In this example, a breakdown in communication between the senior leaders and ensuring the class were informed on what was happening has occurred. The teacher of the class would have attended the meeting and been fully informed, but there does not appear to be a system in place to support the class when the teacher is not present, particularly for a longer period of time. This is only one example, however, and further exploration is required to fully understand the context of this scenario. There is no reference in the policies with regard to LSAs attending meetings in the absence of the teacher, or any systems in place to ensure messages and the line of communication is not broken down.

This is an area for focus that has been examined more closely in the interviews with the teachers and senior leaders in an attempt to unpick messages that are portrayed through this inconsistent communication between the levels of hierarchy within the school.

## **Theme 6: Training**

A huge element of any role is the training that is essential to enable the individual to complete their role successfully. Exploring the continuing professional development opportunities of the LSAs, starting with their initial training as part of the role, building on continuing professional development they are presented with. Further, the impact any training has had upon their ability to undertake their role successfully has been examined, along with any subsequent training opportunities they have had. Two crucial documents supporting the professionalism and CPD opportunities of all the staff in the school are the Performance Management Policy and the Continuing Professional Development Policy. Both of these policies refer to training opportunities within the context of the school and benefit individuals.

Findings from the questionnaires showed that the LSAs have had a lot of training input, with the nature of the training covering a wide range of possible tasks or skills that might be required of them during their working day. On the whole the

LSAs responded in the questionnaires stating that 10 of 11 participants have received either a moderate or great deal of training enabling them to undertake their role. Only one LSA felt they had very little training. This LSA had over 5 years' experience in the role and was a Grade 3; in their responses to questions regarding training experiences, they said they had no training prior to starting the role of LSA, but had had subsequent training in several areas. The opinion that they had little training is subjective and whilst this LSA viewed the training to be 'little', they believed it to be "quite useful" [taken from questionnaire]. They also highlighted some options for further training to help them in their role. An explanation for this, and given they are a Grade 3 LSA, the highest level the school offers, is perhaps related to their personal confidence in their role or feelings of wanting to continually improve in their professional development. From the perspective of senior leaders, the Grade of the LSA suggests they are competent and skilled in their role.

Interesting feedback in the questionnaires showed that the training the LSAs had received enabled them to be part of the team, to support each other and gain positive relationships with the pupils. There was a strong feeling that with the changing needs of the children in the school, the LSAs feel it is essential for them to have the correct training to keep their educational provision to the highest standard.

To extend the thinking on this, the following table expands on the nature of the initial training the LSAs have had across different aspects of their role. Across the different focus areas for training, the results show an even spread with most areas being given priority with training prior to LSAs starting in their role. This is, aside from 'play skills' which scores higher in the 'no' column, indicating that this area has less time spent on it as part of the initial training. Further, what needs to be considered is that at the point of starting the role in the school, some of the LSAs may have worked in different schools and attended training previously, meaning that it might not have been necessary for some to attend this initial training, rather than that the training was not offered to the LSAs. A different explanation to this is that over time the initial training programme that is offered to the LSAs has changed. This would be reflected in the responses given depending on their start date and when they had their initial training, further the

changing role and expectations for LSAs is likely to impact upon the initial training that is in place. This change may be as a result of changes set out by OFSTED on schools over time, or differences in the ‘needs’ of the pupils attending the school, for example pupils with more complex behaviour, or medical needs meaning that staff require specific training on top of training to support pupils with their education. Another consideration at this point is budget implications that may affect the amount of funding available for additional training.

<b>Training</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Support in teaching for pupils	9	2
Personal care – e.g. feeding, changing	9	2
Behaviour management e.g. Team Teach	8	3
Play skills	4	7
Alternative and Augmentative Communication (e.g. PECS, Makaton, eye gaze)	7	4

***Table 4.11: Table to show the training LSAs were given prior to starting their role, or within 1 term of starting***

The latter consideration is particularly prevalent when taking into account the role of the LSA and how it has changed over time. When first introduced in schools, LSAs were more of a ‘helper’, where many of the current aspects of their roles were not present. This includes a greater focus on LSAs supporting pupils’ attainment and specific pupil progress. As the role has evolved over time, the school has had to take action to ensure that the training that is offered to the staff reflects the ‘new’ role the LSAs have. Aspects of the current role such as teaching, personal care and Alternative and Augmentative Communication, for example, happens to have more recently been established as part of the LSA role profile that has taken effect as a result of changes to legislation and previous studies.

Further training opportunities once the LSAs have been established in their role potentially highlights the priorities placed upon certain aspects of their role from senior leaders, but also places emphasis on some areas for development as well as taking into account some of the natural strengths of the LSAs. For example,

in both tables (Tables 4.11 and 4.12) play skills scored low; careful interpretation of this could reveal that the LSAs already have adequate play skills and therefore do not need training on this, or that the senior leaders do not place the skill of supporting the children in developing their play as a priority. During the interviews with senior leaders, the researcher was able to gain a greater understanding as to how training opportunities are prioritised for LSAs and teachers.

<b>Focus of training</b>	<b>Total</b>
Developing your skills to effectively support pupils in their learning	8
Medical or personal care for pupils	11
Behaviour management	10
Development of play skills	3
Communication with pupils	11
Working as part of a team	5
Other	1

**Table 4.12: Table to show the focus of the training that LSAs have had**

In response to this question regarding what training would help them in their role, 5 participants did not stipulate that any further training would help them in their role; whilst 2 of the LSAs ticked only one aspect, the other 4 LSAs selected several options. This is a relatively small number of LSAs who feel they would benefit from additional training in these core aspects of their role. Examining more closely these responses, there appears to be a direct link between how useful the LSAs felt the training they had received to be and wanting more training. For example, of the 5 LSAs who felt they did not want any further training they all stated they found their initial training to be “extremely useful”. In fact, upon closer inspection, 7 LSAs felt the training to be “extremely useful” and the other four LSAs felt it to be “quite useful”. The same four participants chose more than one aspect for further development.

From the questionnaire, it is understood that there is a high level of initial training in place to support the LSAs to carry out the many aspects of their role from care, medical interventions, behaviour management to support teaching and learning.

Upon further analysis of the training that LSAs have had, it has been possible to see that some training has been carried out by the teaching staff, whilst other training was held specifically during INSET days and twilight sessions provided by the school. Whilst a wealth of knowledge and skills is apparent amongst the LSAs, discrepancies lie with reference to external courses or training, showing that they have fewer opportunities to undertake training that is personal to their own development. This was examined more closely during the interviews with the senior leaders to establish justification for this.

<b>Opportunities to attend external courses</b>	<b>Number of LSAs</b>
Never	3
Once a year	5
Once or twice a term	1
Once a week	0
If I apply for it	2

***Table 4.13: Table to show how often LSAs are presented with opportunities to attend external training***

This leads on to raising a question with senior leaders regarding the priorities they place upon training and the training cycle, examining the justification for their choices. LSAs were asked what training would help them in their role, suggesting that although there is training available already, the LSAs feel they would benefit from more.

What training would help in your role?	Total
Developing skills to effectively support pupils in their learning	4
Medical or personal care for pupils	1
Behaviour management	2
Development of play skills	3
Communication with pupils	3
Working as part of a team	2
Other	2

**Table 4.14: Table to show what training LSAs feel would help in their role**

What can be speculated from this is that there could be several possibilities for LSAs feeling they would benefit from further training. One being related to experience with each of these aspects, for example despite having initial training the class with which they worked may not have required them to further develop an aspect of their role. Or, LSAs may not feel confident in some aspects of their role particularly given that: “I feel there is no grading system in the school now.... There’s a Grade 1 who has been in the job for a few months and she’s expected to be at my level... I have 19 years’ experience!” [Emily]. This has the potential to result in mixed feelings about competence when a *novice* LSA is expected to work at the same level and standard as an experienced LSA. Speculatively, in some ways the LSAs and teachers could feel flattered that the SLT have strong faith, respect and trust that their staff are capable of sharing their knowledge and skills with new colleagues.

During the interviews, the LSAs disclosed that once the initial training was complete there were few opportunities for them to progress further. However, evidence from both the questionnaires and interviews suggest that the LSAs feel they would benefit from training opportunities to support them in fulfilling their role successfully, with comments extending to:

“We’ve had the odd training session as in whole assistants and teachers training on certain things” [Caroline – in reference to assessment tools]

“I did one course which I have been left to plan, do and everything with not a lot of back up from the school” [Lily]

Analysis of policy documents reveals that there is a solid protocol of opportunity for development for all staff in the school, which does not appear to be reflected in the opportunities that are actually presented to the LSAs. In terms of performance management, the policy follows local agreements for the support staff and is managed by an Individual Performance Planning (IPP) process over a 12-month period. The policy stipulates that the objectives are “set by the individual’s line manager, which in the instance of an LSA is the class teacher” [taken from Performance Management Policy for the school]. Further, goals or objectives that are set by the line manager must “have regard to what can reasonably be expected given the employee’s role and level of experience” [taken from Performance Management Policy for the school].

On reflection, this policy establishes a solid basis of both professionalism and a consideration to the professional development of the staff. With reference to both the School Improvement Plan and self-assessment opportunities for the “LSA against their key accountabilities in their role profile, objectives for the year are set, with training opportunities reviewed in accordance to the objectives” [taken from Performance Management Policy for the school].

## **Theme 7: High Expectations**

To determine how the LSAs in this special school are deployed and the expectations put upon them by senior leaders and the teaching staff, aspects of their role and the frequency with which they engage in them were examined. The high expectations placed upon the LSAs to act professionally acts as a starting point to their own development of a professional identity, placing emphasis on their position within the organisational culture of the school.

<b>Aspects of assessment</b>	<b>Total</b>
Updating Individual Education Plans	3
Commenting on topic based learning	8
Setting targets	6
Other	2

**Table 4.15: Table to show what aspects of pupil assessment the LSAs participate in - taken from role profiles**

Teaching and learning is a fundamental aspect of education and plays a significant part in the LSA role to support pupils. The table shows that the LSAs in this school are expected to, and do carry out, assessments for the pupils to support the teacher, supporting the huge shift in role profile for LSAs. Interestingly, one of the highest scoring responses for training opportunities that the LSAs would request is to develop skills to support learning for pupils (Table 4.14). A major aspect of assessment is understanding the learning process, posing a dilemma as to how the LSAs can be expected to successfully assess learning if they believe they need support in developing skills to support learning. More interesting is the frequency with which some of the LSAs are expected to participate in pupil assessment directly related to the P-Levels and what were the National Curriculum Levels, or new Age Related Expectations.

<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Number of LSAs</b>
Never	2
Once a year	1
Once or twice a term	5
Once a week or more	3

**Table 4.16: Table to show how often the LSAs participate in pupil assessment of P-Levels / National Curriculum Levels**

Training and support given to the LSAs to fulfil this professional aspect of their role needs to be examined more closely, and a greater understanding developed

of how effective they are at supporting the teacher with this crucial element of their role.

The high expectations placed upon the LSAs, from both the senior leaders and teachers, however, does not appear to have an impact on the enjoyment, or fulfilment the LSAs have in their role. Overall, the LSAs reflected that they enjoyed their role, further commenting about why they feel this is. Many of these comments revealed the pupils to be at the heart of their role.

<b>How enjoyable is your role?</b>	<b>Number of LSAs</b>
Extremely enjoyable	4
Quite enjoyable	3
Moderately enjoyable	3
Slightly enjoyable	0
Not at all enjoyable	0

**Table 4.17: Table to show how enjoyable the LSAs find their role**

Perhaps high expectations from the senior leaders is accepted by the LSAs. The LSAs are able to understand the professional nature of their role and the need to be highly skilled and knowledgeable is part of their role. Some of the supporting comments regarding the way LSAs feel about their role suggest this to be true. The comments from the LSAs are mostly a positive reflection with a very definite focus on their role and the impact it has upon the pupils and their families, with the mixed feelings of their role relating to the relationships they have with SLT.

Comments – direct quotes from the questionnaires:

- Enjoy working with the children but feel taken for granted by SLT. Little support from them
- Every day is different and when the children achieve something it is most enjoyable to see
- Both challenging and rewarding. It's always the small things. Making a difference to a family's life
- Working with staff who support each other. Some staff treating you with no respect or being rude and not giving the support to the team or students
- Working as part of a good class team. Seeing the pupils' progress. Difficult / challenging pupils can change the balance of the class, making it less enjoyable
- Helping to support the children with their personal needs. Good support staff and team

**Figure 4.6: Comments from questionnaires: role enjoyment**

During the interviews, the LSAs talked about the teachers sharing their knowledge and expertise around teaching and assessment. This in turn, was disseminated by some of the Grade 3 LSAs as they shared their expertise with colleagues.

When thinking about the contrast between LSAs and their experience in the role, a key concern expressed by Emily during her interview was that she does not believe there is still a Grading system in the school with the LSAs. With reference to assessing pupils' progress, there is an expectation from SLT to assess at the same level:

“In the school at the moment everybody is expected to assess to the same level. [Interviewer: Even if they just walked through the door?] Yes. They're informed briefly by the class teacher. It feels a bit unfair, but they're briefly explained how to assess a child, what to look out for” [Emily]

Caroline discusses how working as part of a team enables effective recording and assessing to take place, to a high standard:

“In class we do quite a bit of recording and assessing and then discussing as a team whether they should go up to the next step.” [Caroline]

Lily shares how the high expectations set by teachers and senior leaders can result in difficult situations in the class:

“No, that doesn’t worry me [not having the skill set – referring to new team members] because people can learn skills and if you’re new that’s fine. It’s when you ask people to do things and they don’t. I find that difficult, when they never learn to do it.” [Lily]

She continues to explain how this adds to the pressure put on her as a Grade 3 by those of a lower Grade than her, when members of the team are negative towards an element of their role. This adds a layer of perspective to the theme of high expectations when it is the LSAs that are experiencing a role reversal where they are the ones placing the level of expectation onto others.

The expectations on the LSAs are clear and outlined in the role profiles for their Grades and they are given opportunities for self-assessment on their performance to determine any development points. There is a responsibility placed upon the LSAs during this process to reflect and decide upon their personal areas for improvement. These moments of self-reflection can offer insight, challenging our own prejudice and value. A possibility for senior leaders would be to reflect themselves, modelling to the LSAs that it is appropriate to have high expectations, but to also be in a position of engaging with personal development.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The questionnaires and interviews with the LSAs have revealed some interesting themes relating to the research questions and key concepts of professional identities, continuing professional development and organisational culture.

Through this data analysis we have begun to understand the way the LSAs perceive their role in the school and the professional identities that they have developed within their role. A key theme that stemmed from the LSAs was the

idea of professional integrity and its place within the school. A clear strength of the LSAs is their support for each other as part of their own sub-culture as well as the positive nature of the relationships they have with the class teacher. There is a strong element of respect and value demonstrated in the expressions used when talking about their role in the classroom; less strong is the feeling of being part of the whole school organisational culture. This was an avenue for further investigation during the interviews with the teachers and senior leaders to gain deeper insight into the way the role of LSA is perceived throughout the school and the place they have in the organisational culture.

Despite this, there is an obvious feeling of perceived professionalism amongst the LSAs and whilst they may display ill feelings towards members of the Senior Leadership Team on certain aspects, there are aspirations from LSAs with regard to their own professional identities.

Continuing professional development, including initial training has its place in the school and the LSAs are able to understand the benefits of engaging with training, but also the value placed upon sharing professional knowledge amongst themselves and their colleagues. There are a breadth of tasks LSAs are required to carry out daily, and they have been provided with opportunities to develop professionally.

Mixed perceptions towards value and respect as a theme from the LSAs poses questions with regard to the extent to which the vision of the school is shared and promoted to develop a collaborative organisational culture.

In the next chapter, the perception of the LSAs' role and position in the school will be explored from the perspective of the teaching staff and SLT. Some of the issues raised by the LSAs will be considered in greater depth, to gain another level of understanding.

# Chapter Five – Results and Analysis 2: Teacher and Senior Leader Interviews

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## 5.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to focus on the data from the interviews with the teaching staff and senior leaders. All teaching staff and senior leaders volunteered to be interviewed. Three interviews were carried out with teaching staff. The experiences of the teachers within the school and in previous schools vary. This will inevitably impact on their perspectives of the case study school. The purpose of the interviews with the senior leaders was to draw on the experiences and perceptions of the Learning Support Assistants and the teaching staff. Examining the organisational culture from a third viewpoint has enabled the researcher to understand what strategies and systems are put in place, with reference to the School Improvement Plan to support LSAs to develop their professionalism. Two senior leaders volunteered to be interviewed.

<b>Teacher</b>	<b>Jack</b>	<b>Sarah</b>	<b>Lucy</b>
<b>Years of experience</b>	2 <sup>nd</sup> year of teaching; 2 <sup>nd</sup> term at the school	6 <sup>th</sup> year of teaching; 2 <sup>nd</sup> year at the school	6 <sup>th</sup> year of teaching; started at school as NQT
<b>Role in school</b>	Responsibility for Music	Responsibility for English. Teacher Governor	Responsibility for communication (AAC)

**Table 5.1: Table to show experience of teachers**

<b>Senior leader</b>	<b>Alex</b>	<b>Melanie</b>
<b>Years of experience</b>	16 year career, 4 terms in current school	24 years' experience at current school
<b>Role in school</b>	Senior leader in 3 special schools, including current role	Worked as class teacher prior to being a Senior leader in the school

**Table 5.2: Table to show experience of senior leaders**

## 5.2. Interviews

The interviews with the teachers and senior leaders were transcribed and transcripts were analysed thinking about the three key concepts of this study. From careful content analysis several themes have emerged, mostly similar to that of the LSAs, where different perspectives of the same theme have arisen. This has enabled a far greater depth of understanding around the school as an organisational culture.

The following themes have been identified from the interviews with the teachers and senior leaders and will be discussed in relation to their perspective of these themes:

Themes:	
1.	Professional integrity
2.	Sharing professional knowledge and learning through experience
3.	Value and respect
4.	Communication
5.	Training
6.	High expectations
7.	Organisational Culture – roles as individuals

**Figure 5.1: Themes emerging from interviews with teachers and SLT**

## Theme 1: Professional Integrity

From scrutiny of the interview transcripts, it has been possible to gauge a different perspective of professional integrity from the viewpoint of the teachers and senior leaders. In his interview, Jack described how he frequently thinks about the way he is perceived by other people. He compares his previous experiences of professionalism to the way he views it in this setting.

“It’s more about my actions that speak for my work not that I am wearing a suit” [Jack]

This comment offers huge insight into different levels of professionalism and how it can be portrayed differently within a setting and across professions. It sets a precedent that there is more to being a professional than the clothes that are worn.

Another weave to this theme of professional integrity lies within the idea of morale and wellbeing related to ‘change’ that has occurred in the school. Change is inevitable; however, Lucy divulges her concerns with how this change has impacted upon the LSAs:

“If we’re not getting it [praise] when we need it then it’s really difficult. But you can’t moan to your LSAs in an unprofessional way because they see it and then it goes in a circle” [Lucy]

Lucy considers the impact her position in the school would have upon her LSAs and demonstrates professional integrity by remaining professional and acting as a role model to her colleagues, despite her own feelings. The idea that the senior leaders and teachers are role models for their teams is shown through the concept of professional integrity knowing that “you’ve got to be mindful of people you’re working with” [Jack].

Further, the teachers consider their position in the organisational culture, and that of their LSA colleagues and how they fit within this culture with the LSAs being,

“In an awkward position... at the bottom of the chain” [Jack]

This feeling was portrayed by the LSAs themselves of how they perceive their position within the organisational culture, and appears to be how Jack, at least, feels they are perceived also.

In Sarah's interview she further questions the expectations put upon the LSAs to act and be professional. Sarah puts the concept of what it means to behave professionally back onto the responsibility of the Senior Leadership Team, questioning how much it is represented within the school ethos.

"It's usually touched upon at the beginning of each year but then kind of forgotten about and not brought up in a professional way" [Sarah]

Sarah's belief is that there is not enough discussion from the SLT to demonstrate the level of professionalism from the top but that "a lot of the teachers do it within the classroom... what we [teachers] expect from them [LSAs] and that more could be done to have ownership of it [Sarah] and therefore the integrity must be modelled firstly by the senior leaders.

Jack continues by stating that, "they [LSAs] are all individuals," which is a crucial opinion, demonstrating professional integrity amongst the team and showing a mature and deeper understanding of the LSAs and their own perception of their role. Jack's opinion underpins that each person will have their own strengths that they will bring to the role and class team, and this should be embraced by the teacher to maximise the learning experiences for the pupils.

From the perspective of the senior leaders, this perception of the teachers is paralleled by the way Alex speaks of layers of the roles and responsibilities of the LSAs and the teachers.

"I think it needs to be recognised that there are different layers in leadership and I don't think we are all required to do the same thing" [Alex]

What becomes clear from this is that professional integrity also includes the idea of understanding the layers of leadership present between the LSAs, teacher and senior leaders and this can reflect the developing professionalism. At different points during their career, or even potentially in the school day, it must be

acknowledged that professionalism may look different both from a physical sense, but also in the way that an individual conducts themselves.

Whilst this is from the interviews with the LSAs, the senior leaders' perspective adds insight to this as they speak encouragingly of their colleagues, particularly from a professional point-of-view:

“People are very supportive of their colleagues. It’s kind of reinforcing and developing that professionalism amongst all staff” [Alex]

From this a difference in perspective begins to shape a deeper interpretation of the organisational culture of the school, and how the individuals who work in the school fit within this culture and the shared moral purpose that lies beneath the surface. Another aspect of this professional integrity lies within the changes that have occurred, as a consequence in changes in standards and legislation. Melanie, who has had the most experience within this school confirms a true sense of professionalism within the school but at different levels, or layers.

“I think there has to be higher expectations and even within the teachers there has to be levels of expectations depending on where they are in their experience... and for LSAs. All of those things come to bear really” [Melanie]

Furthermore, the idea of having professional integrity also lies within each person understanding their role, but also knowing their level of responsibility within that role summarising that “with increased salary comes increased responsibility” [Alex] and therefore it is important to understand the professional role of each member of the team.

## **Theme 2: Sharing Professional Knowledge**

The way in which the teachers develop their professional knowledge reflects the experiences described by the LSAs in their responses to the questionnaires and interviews. A significant portion of the teachers' professional development stems from learning through experience, including a 'hands-on' approach where many

skills are modelled by more experienced staff, including other teachers and Grade 3 LSAs.

Lucy speaks of her teacher training and NQT induction year, which she completed at the school.

“I was able to do a lot of training as an NQT to develop my skills that were specific to special needs. Most of my training has been in-house training or learning on the job. Some has come from senior management’s experience and knowledge” [Lucy]

“I’ve been very lucky I had my outdoor leadership course... but with the whole school we have speakers come in to do sessions... and the LSAs get as much as the teachers do for those during INSETS” [Jack]

These statements describe the different training experiences that are available for the teachers, but also provides insight into the nature of the training available for the teachers and LSAs either in-house, through specific courses, or learning through experience.

The experience of Lucy and Jack is supported by Sarah who speaks of her transition as a mainstream primary teacher to teaching in a special school and how she has developed her leadership skills working with LSAs.

“Coming here, you are in charge of a group of LSAs, which at first I struggled with... We work day-to-day with a team. We haven’t been given opportunities to develop it other than through experience” [Sarah]

Lucy continues to describe how she has been able to share in her new-found knowledge and skills with her LSAs, particularly in terms of leading the class in her absence.

“It’s done by me. I would lead them in planning. A Level [Grade] 3 would lead the class and they are usually more experienced but it’s through doing it” [Lucy]

Thinking about how this professional knowledge is shared through experience portrays a development model of practical training. Through discussions with the

senior leaders, the thinking behind this model was detailed and, whilst there was some feeling that both the teaching staff and the LSAs understand the purpose of learning through experience, still this model is very much based upon the assumption that the LSA has sufficient skills to impart to their colleagues.

Melanie's vast experience in the school, overseeing changes throughout the school setting, justifies this structure and how LSAs are provided with professional development opportunities. Parallels between the CPD opportunities presented to the teachers and LSAs as they progress are indicated:

"I think the idea of giving people interviews encourages them to take small groups, building up to larger groups and build on to taking the class group. So in an interview for an LSA 3 we are looking at the fact they have had the opportunity to do that and are about to do that" [Melanie]

This suggests that senior leaders believe in professional development and that the LSAs should be treated as professionals in their roles. Melanie is able to explain the benefits of this structure to support their LSAs in progressing, stating that:

"I think just sharing with colleagues is valuable. You don't always have to go off on a course" [Melanie]

"I guess they [LSAs] would need maximum support from the rest of their team. They'd need encouragement and the confidence to do it in the first place.... People are very supportive of their colleagues" [Alex]

With this there is a sense of trust amongst the staff team that there is a level of experience, skill and knowledge present worthwhile to be shared. The model for this seems to work successfully for both the LSAs, and for the teachers, demonstrating a sense of professionalism from the senior leaders towards both the LSAs and the teachers.

### Theme 3: Value and Respect

From the perspective of the teaching staff, there appeared to be similar mixed feelings relating to their position within the organisational culture of the school unravelling a complex sense of mutual respect amongst the staff. They spoke about having respect for the senior leaders, but also for the LSAs which on occasion placed them in the middle of two cohorts of colleagues. In many ways this places the teaching staff in a strong position for understanding the perspective of their colleagues from both sides, but can also add pressure to their role particularly at times where issues or concerns may be raised, or if SLT has specifically requested for incentives not to be shared with the LSAs.

Jack described his role as a teacher in the school as being an awkward position to be in:

“I think if you’re at the bottom of the chain of command [referring to the LSAs] then you see it in black and white and there’s a job to be done. And if you’re in SLT then they will say ‘here it is, this is what needs to be done’ and as teachers you have to try and adjust it to meet the needs of everyone” [Jack]

Lucy and Sarah feel strongly that SLT are under pressure and as a result there have been changes in the roles that SLT have:

“I think as teachers we’re in the middle. We see the front line of the LSAs and the everyday goings on of the classroom and how different decisions really impact upon the class. But at the same time we see and we understand why and what SLT are trying to implement and why those changes are important or in the best interests of the class. So we get the best of both worlds” [Lucy]

“SLT have taken on a different role [due to structural changes in the school] and that has led to more pressure. We have had more pressure put on us and that runs through the LSAs. I think some of the value and respect has been missed because people are stressed and they have other things on their minds” [Sarah]

All of the teachers speak highly of their senior leaders and express understanding of the role that they have in the school. There is compassion, amongst the three teachers who were interviewed, towards the senior leaders and their role in the school. Although they all described controversial or challenging situations that they were involved in in relation to the LSAs, they showed respect for the SLT,

“I don’t envy the SLT now I’ve managed people!” [Jack]

The teachers also placed emphasis on a high level of respect and value of the LSAs and the role they have in the school. Comments affirming their personal opinion of the LSAs include “common courtesy” [Lucy] by saying “thank you” and Jack acknowledging that you have to “be mindful of people you’re working with” as there are “lots of different points of view”. This again confirms the respect the LSAs have for the teaching staff and vice-versa and the way they work together in their teams, or sub-cultures.

Interestingly, Melanie, in her Senior Leadership role, portrayed a different perspective to showing respect and value to the staff team (both LSAs and teachers). She spoke about back-to-work interviews that are held for staff when they have been off work. As a result she believes they have been able to better support the staff team with work, and non-work related issues,

“There is a culture that staff look out for other staff and say ‘do you realise so-and-so has a problem?’ I think it has helped.” [Melanie]

The conversation with Melanie around this aspect of her Senior Leadership role shed light on how, in many ways, the teachers and LSAs are treated and valued in similar ways, despite many differences in their roles and position within the organisational culture of the school. In particular, this approach also places respect to the LSAs in the same manner as the teachers with regard to being treated as professionals and engaging in professional dialogues.

#### **Theme 4: Communication**

Communication was a theme that flowed through the interviews with the teachers in much the same way as it did for the LSAs. There was a strong feeling from the teaching staff that some of the changes that took place in the school recently

were not communicated effectively with the teaching staff, or the LSAs. The teachers explain their viewpoint of how these changes impact on their working relationships and the way in which the teachers run their classes,

“[Being in the class team] You can review what’s happening day-to-day and see everyone’s point of view” [Jack]

As senior leaders are not involved with the daily running of the classes and the daily communication with the LSAs, difficulties with communication links between the LSAs and SLT can arise. Systems are put in class by senior leaders in an attempt to overcome this:

“As a school we try to have whole school meetings where some of the things that have been implemented or changed might be explained then it comes straight from senior management” [Lucy]

Lucy’s description of this whole-school strategy being put in place, demonstrates senior leaders’ recognition of an ongoing issue amongst the staff as a whole, of the difficulties with communication at the different levels, but that there is a system in place in an attempt to overcome it as far as is possible. From the point of view of senior leaders, who see the ‘big picture’ of strategies, policies and systems that are in place across the school, both Alex and Melanie explain their role in establishing effective communication:

“As a senior leader you get to see a much more global picture. I think it’s harder, but I don’t think it matters but there are times when you have a limited overview [as an LSA]” [Alex]

Here Alex is able to express the perspective of the LSAs when they have a limited overview. In this situation there is invariably going to be questions due to lack of knowledge or understanding; however, the role that the LSAs have compared to SLT is different in the organisational culture of the school.

Melanie is able to provide an example of this ‘limited overview’ within a real context of the school acknowledging that “change is difficult for everybody” [Melanie] and that staff would be “a little bit nervous” [Melanie] continuing by

detailing how the change has been disseminated, taking into account the 'limited overview' the LSAs, and some teachers will have initially,

"We have tried to work together as a team, as a teaching staff particularly... We are trialling different [assessment] systems.... It will be a team decision about which will be the most useful" [Melanie]

Melanie continues to explain that once the decision has been made, the LSAs will be up-skilled. This is a clear example demonstrating the need for the teaching staff to be involved in the process of change; yet at this point it would not be practical or logical to involve the entire staff team. What is possibly missing from the perspective of the LSAs is an explanation from senior leaders to ensure that they understand that their professional integrity is valued, although in this particular instance it is not viable for everyone to share their opinion. This may act as a buffer to their feelings of being 'left out' of communication or decision-making between the senior leaders and teachers.

## **Theme 5: Training**

Some aspects of staff training and development have been touched upon through the previous themes, particularly in relation to the sharing of professional knowledge amongst colleagues in a 'learning through experience' strategy. This theme focuses on specific training opportunities that have been presented to the staff at all levels and the continuing professional development that is in place examining how this benefits the staff.

The LSAs spoke of a breadth of initial training that is in place to enable them to fulfil their role, whilst the CPD policy stipulates that both personal and professional training originates from the School Improvement Plan (SIP), the IPPs, Performance Management meetings and that new staff have an opportunity to highlight training needs during their induction.

Looking closely at the opportunities that both teachers and senior leaders have had to develop themselves, as well as being supported to upskill LSAs, was a focus of the interviews carried out.

Further insight was provided into the induction process by the teachers in their interviews, offering some current limitations to the specific training opportunities for the LSAs, as Lucy explains when describing the current package that is provided:

“The induction pack is very specific to the school. Rather than on theories on education, they get trained about the benefits of using equipment and things like that. But it’s not specifically linked to education” [Lucy]

Lucy suggests here that most of the education-related training and knowledge that is required of the staff is dealt with by the class teacher as they learn and develop in the role. This can be stressful for the teaching staff and other LSAs, being required to up skill their colleagues in the working day, but also has its benefits as it is “within the classroom and related to what we are doing.” [Lucy]

A limitation to the training opportunities expressed by the teaching staff, however, was highlighted in difficulties they have had in developing skills to lead and manage their teams of LSAs in the classroom, and through their role as curriculum leader. The previous experiences of the three teachers meant that the skill of leading their teams was not already embedded in their skill set and was something that they were required to learn quickly, and then use this skill to up skill their LSAs.

Jack describes his own situation:

“I was a lot different to the previous teacher here so I had big boots to fill. It’s been a really new experience and I had no training for it and it’s not something they do during the PGCE. It was a steep learning curve!” [Jack]

Jack was able to overcome this by sitting down and discussing things with the LSAs. But Sarah also had difficulties after her transition from a mainstream school:

“I’ve come from a mainstream school to coming here. You are in charge of a group of LSAs which at first I struggled with.... We haven’t been given opportunities to develop it other than through experience” [Sarah]

It was very encouraging that the teachers were confident to speak honestly about their own shortcomings, but also to describe how they were able to overcome these challenges. Leading and managing people can be difficult, particularly when you are new to the environment and in some cases the LSAs that the teachers are expected to lead have many years more experience than the teacher. This lends towards the LSAs having preconceived high expectations of the teacher, and can understandably be quite daunting for the teacher.

From the senior leaders' perspective Alex spoke of her role in the school and her passion for professional development:

“I believe in developing everybody’s strengths and offering development opportunities and professional development at all levels because you need to have that structured senior leader bit, middle leader bit, and it filters all the way down” [Alex]

Since starting at the school Alex has been responsible for CPD and talks of the breadth of professional development that stems “not just [from] the CPD that comes from target setting and the SIP but training that we want to deliver to the school.” Alex suggests that there is a new focus on CPD in the school and that the opportunities that will be presented to the staff will differ slightly from what has been in place in the past.

“Our target is something everyone has in common. So that gives a message that absolutely everyone in the structure of the school has that expectation. And the same treatment and targets” [Alex]

This can be interpreted to mean that some of the concerns raised by the LSAs that they had limited CPD opportunities have been recognised and are being addressed by Alex in her new role. It takes time for new systems to become embedded, but the ethos behind CPD in the school is leaning towards a whole-school strategy that will ensure that all staff are presented with opportunities to develop; it will also take into consideration the strengths, and limitations of individuals, to support in their professional development.

This is supported by Melanie, who confirms Alex's in-depth explanation of the CPD cycle, and she further details how some of the training described by the LSAs takes place throughout the year.

“We have a solid induction and there are elements of that induction that continue and carry on into their [LSA] CPD folder. We try to build in opportunities into staff meetings for CPD and draw on the strengths and knowledge of other professionals” [Melanie]

Melanie's use of phrasing confirms the notion that the LSAs are seen as professionals by referring to physiotherapists, speech therapists' and nurses as “other professionals”, recognising that there is professional status amongst all her colleagues. There appears to very much be a detailed training schedule to ensure that all staff carry a certain level of expertise through the induction package held in the school. Something for the senior leaders to consider, however, as part of the training cycle is spending time supporting the teachers to develop their leadership style so as to be effective leaders in the classroom, also for their curriculum responsibility which is perhaps more about confidence than skill set.

## **Theme 6: High Expectations**

In data from the questionnaires and from during the interviews, the LSAs spoke consistently about the high expectations placed upon them by senior leaders, often via the teaching staff (See Chapter 4: Theme 7). The interviews with the teachers and senior leaders opened this discussion further to gain a second and third perspective to this theme.

During her interview, Sarah shared her experience of the high expectations placed on the staff team from the senior leaders, and from herself as a class teacher:

“I think everyone knows the expectations. It's usually touched upon at the beginning of the year and I think a lot of teachers do it within the classroom and with what we expect from them daily but not as a whole school ethos” [Sarah]

Sarah continues in an attempt to problem-solve the concern with the high expectations placed upon everyone by senior leaders:

“It could be shared a bit more regularly, or make them [LSAs] feel more involved in the process and what they should do and what their role entails, to have ownership of it” [Sarah]

Sarah makes an interesting point here, by putting herself into the perspective of the LSAs and considering their point of view on the situation. Here, Sarah takes time to reflect on the organisational culture of the school and the idea that the LSAs are often thought to be ‘bottom’ under the teachers and senior leaders, which is something Jack raised also. Creating an ethos that establishes the LSAs as individuals with opinions that can impact positively upon the school can create an environment whereby all members of the culture are valued. Based upon the interviews with the LSAs, it can be seen that generally they respect the teaching staff, and that on the whole they agree with the role that they have, but that having ownership of it could create a feeling of responsibility over what is expected of them.

Lucy, who appears to feel the pressure from the senior leaders and from her team, explains how she manages the expectations she places on her team on a daily basis:

“My expectation is for them [LSAs] to work with individual children or in a small group of children and to know what the aims of that session is for the child. I wouldn’t expect them to know the whole class. I expect them to know what that child is doing and record that. And to act professionally around the children” [Lucy]

Lucy describes the same expectations that the LSAs spoke of and that are expected by SLT, and inspection of the LSA role profiles shows that these expectations are part of that role. Lucy’s reflection of these expectations, however, is that she recognises that:

“The expectations are similar [to that of SLT] but we allow more time as we know and understand the running of the day better” [Lucy]

Lucy's insight into this once again demonstrates the level of respect and value that is shown between the teachers and the LSAs. The teachers appeared to be highly skilled at meeting the high expectations of senior leaders as well as accommodating the needs of their teams to create a positive learning environment for the children. This is supported by Jack's position, as he describes how he manages the situation:

"The main thing is to make sure that me, and the LSAs operated at a rate we were happy with. I was really worried about getting everything to the exact spec. but we worked together to get it done" [Jack]

It was acknowledged by Melanie that there are differences with expectations. Melanie spoke about behaviour and professionalism in terms of the Code of Conduct which "applies to everybody equally", but she also spoke about differences in terms of the levels of the staff:

"I think there has to be higher expectations, in terms of CPD and knowledge and all of that from the teachers because they're paid more... and even within the teachers there has to be levels of expectations depending on where they are in their experience" [Melanie]

The model is understood in practice by the senior leaders, however as disclosed by the LSAs, it is not necessarily felt in practice that there is an option. This also relates to the idea of professionalism amongst the staff and that there are differences in the layers of the roles and responsibilities of the different levels. This difference in expectation is likely to fit appropriately to the roles and responsibilities of the LSAs, teachers and the senior leaders whereby different opportunities are also presented to the LSAs and teachers. It seems that, without necessarily knowing it, the teachers also place different levels of expectations and responsibilities on the LSAs in their role as part of the class team. They are able to successfully manage the position they hold between the LSAs and the SLT.

It seems from the reflections of the teachers that whilst there are high expectations placed on them and on their LSAs, the senior leaders are aware of the high expectations that they place upon the staff and there is a high level of

trust from the SLT that the teams will work together to achieve and meet the expectations. This trust echoes the concept of professionalism across the school wherein all members of the organisational culture are treated as professionals.

## **Theme 7: Organisational Culture**

Here, the organisational culture of the school from the perspective of the teachers and senior leaders and how each strand of the organisation fits together, will be examined. The LSAs felt, at times, that they weren't part of the 'bigger picture' in the school as they weren't always informed or that strategies were not communicated with them effectively. From the perspective of the teachers, Sarah gave an example showing empathy to the perspective of the LSAs with regards to SLT:

“I think there are certain things SLT want teachers to know and not LSAs but I think there are ways of putting it that wouldn't upset people” [Sarah]

Sarah speaks of a firm understanding of the differences in the role that SLT have, of teachers and LSAs working together as part of the organisational culture, but that at times this difference also means that there is an element of 'not knowing' at the different levels.

Jack, when speaking of the organisational culture, compares the working relationship between the teachers and LSAs and the senior leaders and LSAs, concluding that:

“SLT can be a bit distant... they don't currently work in the classrooms so I think you can become a little bit removed over time” [Jack]

Jack's point of view suggests that some of the misunderstandings between the SLT and LSAs could be addressed and that they are mainly a consequence of the differences in their role and position within the organisational culture. These are unlikely to be deliberate. Lucy supports Jack's feelings, yet more on behalf of the teachers and LSAs shedding light on how at the present time morale in the school is low:

“[The changes] have had a negative impact on the wellbeing of staff... I think motivation has been a big area that seems to be lacking” [Lucy]

Critically, the teachers show more support and compassion towards the LSAs, compared to the senior leaders. The position of the teachers in the school and the way in which they contribute to the organisational culture has the potential to create opportunities for the shared beliefs of the teachers to impact upon the sub-culture they share with the LSAs. The impact of school improvement and the changes that inevitably take place as a result appear to have a mixed response from the LSAs and the teachers. Within this organisational culture, the understanding and position the teachers have can influence the culture and shared vision in driving the improvements to teaching and learning. Arguably, the teachers have a responsibility to drive these beliefs from the senior leaders within the sub-cultures of the teachers and LSAs to influence positively upon the whole school organisational culture and shared beliefs within the school. Evidence from the interviews with teachers suggests their loyalty towards the LSAs is strong, and whilst the teachers showed understanding towards the difficult position senior leaders have in their place in the school, at the time of the interviews, the teachers did not wholly bridge the gap between the sub-cultures. This has the potential to cause difficulties within the overall organisational culture and may undermine senior leaders' efforts to create a unified school culture.

Alex, in her interview, added a different dimension to the organisation of the school, shedding light on the perspective of it from a senior leader, with regard to the layers within the culture:

“I think it needs to be recognised that there are different layers in leadership and I don't think that we are all required to do the same thing. I think that needs to be kept hold of because we're not all paid the same so there is that structure in place and that's not to say any role isn't important because of course it is” [Alex]

Alex shared valuable insight into a third dimension of thinking about the structure and culture of the school as an organisation, particularly with her reference to how, with “increased salary comes increased responsibility” [Alex]. This phrasing opens new thinking to the perspective of the LSAs where they have felt excluded,

yet perhaps the reality from the perspective of the senior leaders is not to prevent them from knowing but more a response to feeling that the LSAs should not feel responsible for all aspects of the school. It could be that this misconception from the LSAs has led to unnecessary ill feeling towards senior leaders.

Putting all three perspectives into context it is possible to understand some of the feelings from the LSAs, yet factoring in the views of senior leaders it does not appear that their intention was to cause ill-feeling amongst the staff. This provides for an opportunity to address these issues, explaining the global picture of the school to all parties to ensure that at each level they felt valued and respected.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

The interviews with the teaching staff have confirmed the strong bonds that are present between the LSAs and the teachers within those interviewed at the school. There appears to be a greater understanding of the Senior Leadership Team from the teachers and their role and position within the school. The teachers demonstrate their respect for the role SLT play in the school culture and organisation; however, they clearly have huge respect for the LSAs and can feel as though their role of teacher in the school places them in a difficult position. They have developed skills that enable them to meet the demands of both the SLT and the LSAs.

Underpinning the role of LSA and teacher in the school are the challenges they have to ensure they are equipped with the skills to be successful in teaching and learning throughout the school.

Crucial to the study was gaining a third perspective to the organisational culture and understanding from 'the top' how the school team works together. It is clear from the interviews with the senior leaders that there is an overarching belief that it is their responsibility to ensure the smooth running of the school and to make decisions, only sometimes in discussion with their colleagues. This is not as a means to circumnavigate their opinion, but merely a by-product of their having different defined roles within the school. This appears at times from their

interviews and questionnaires, however, to be misunderstood by the teachers and LSAs.

Further, it is apparent that the whole school is working together to develop professionalism at all levels throughout the school, with staff working together to support each other to achieve this. Emphasis is placed upon CPD opportunities outlined by the School Improvement Plan whilst also offering personal opportunities to engage with professional development. The senior leaders showed respect for their colleagues, with an understanding that it is vital for there to be differences in the roles and expectations of teachers, and LSAs.

# Chapter Six – Discussion

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## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to examine the findings from the questionnaires and interviews with the Learning Support Assistants, teachers and senior leaders through detailed analysis of the material presented in Chapters Four and Five with reference to the conceptual framework and in light of reviewed literature. These chapters presented the personal experiences of the participants with regard to the key concepts on which this study focuses – professional identities, continuing professional development and organisational culture. The inter-relationships of these concepts were explored, cross-examining the different perspectives held by individuals within the same setting and unpicking key themes that emerged from the questionnaires and interviews. Time was taken to fully account for and delve into the layers within the culture of the school and how these groups of individuals are presented, and represented as professionals.

Currently, there is limited knowledge surrounding the professional identities of LSAs, particularly in special schools, and how they are supported by their colleagues to develop this within their role. A distinct lack of career structure and of a specific qualification required of them to enter into the role has proved problematic for LSAs; furthermore, their varied backgrounds and experiences, alongside dramatic change in their role over a relatively short time frame has led to misconceptions about the impact they have on teaching and learning. The DISS-Study which began in 2003 (Blatchford, et al., 2009) was pivotal in leading to a more defined role and has been hugely influential in changing how LSAs are deployed in schools. A consequence of this is the need for more training and structure to be put in place for LSAs, to enable them to be successful and play a vital role in children's progress.

Upon examining the data, the following research questions help to shape the findings analytically, to produce new understanding of the interrelated core key concepts of this study:

- Q1. How do LSAs perceive their role and their professional identities within an English special school?
- Q2. How do the teachers and senior staff perceive the role of the LSA in the school?
- Q3. How do LSAs perceive and experience CPD within the school and what are their development needs?
- Q4. To what extent is a shared vision, or ethos, promoted within the school to develop a collaborative organisational culture?

Drawn out from a scrutiny of relevant policies, examination of questionnaires and analysis of interviews comparable themes became apparent from the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders. Interestingly, constructing levels of insight from three different perspectives around these themes created deeper understanding of the ways in which individual perspectives influence the way in which the organisational culture is perceived, particularly from the viewpoint of the LSAs. Figure 6.1 below details how these themes fit within the three key concepts of this study and offers a revised conceptual framework to help explore the role of LSAs within special school contexts.



**Figure 6.1: The Study's Revised Conceptual Framework**

The following sections will consider in-depth analysis of each of the four research questions that comprise this case study with reference to each of the key concepts and themes depicted in figure 6.1.

## **6.2 Professional Identities (RQ1 and RQ2)**

- Q1. How do LSAs perceive their role and their professional identities within an English special school?
- Q2. How do the teachers and senior staff perceive the role of the LSA in the school?

To address these questions, we must first consider how the role of LSA is perceived in the school, followed by understanding how the LSAs develop their professional identities, concluding with establishing what we know about professionalism in the school in order to answer the research questions.

### **6.2.1 How is the role of LSA perceived in the school?**

Highly pivotal research carried out from 2003 to 2008, the findings from the DISS-Study (Blatchford, et al., 2009), majorly influenced the deployment of LSAs in schools. Studies such as Trent's (2014), which identified gaps in support staff developing professional identities as a result of ill-informed understanding of their own roles, as well as continued confusion over the various job titles, job descriptions and qualifications (Dew-Hughes, et al., 1998), have led to questions being raised about whether it is achievable for LSAs to develop professional identities. Whilst these studies had their limitations, changes took place across England in the role that LSAs have in schools. Essentially, the way in which LSAs are deployed is crucial to their success in school, with the conclusions of the DISS-Study (Blatchford, et al., 2009) reflecting on the impact that support staff have and on pupils not making progress as expected. The role profiles of the LSAs working in the special school were scrutinised and acted as a starting point in the questionnaires to gauge which elements of this role profile the LSAs felt their time was spent on. The complexities of the role of the LSA in a special school creates some non-tangible similarities to the impact LSAs may have upon teaching and learning in a mainstream setting with the impact they have on pupil

outcomes not easily measured. However, the deployment of the LSAs is crucial to understanding the role that they have in the school.

It was determined from examining the LSAs' role profiles to divide their role into four components:

- Working with the teacher to make pupil assessments
- Working with the teacher to support with behaviour management
- Working with the teacher to support in the implementation of care plans (medical; physiotherapy; speech therapy; etc.)
- Carrying out tasks and activities with small groups of pupils or individual pupils (and sometimes plan, depending on Grade of LSA)

Looking closely at these four components, data from the questionnaires showed that the LSAs placed high value on each of the key aspects of their role. What has been revealed from this study is the diverse nature of the role that the LSA has. The role covers a wide range of skills, competencies and knowledge to enable them to support the teacher in teaching and learning for pupils. Our new understanding of how the LSAs are able to share their professional knowledge not only amongst themselves, and from their colleagues is a theme which is paralleled through the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders' data.

Drawing upon the interviews with the teachers and senior leaders, what became clear was mutual agreement on the crucial role that the LSAs have in the school. Further, whilst the LSAs had defined role profiles, their individual deployment was specific to each class and the needs of the class. Teachers are given autonomy over how they deploy their LSAs within their class and LSAs feel confident in their role and their ability to fulfil their role successfully. The theme of value and respect was revealed during the interviews, particularly between the LSAs and the teachers, and highlights the close professional relationships that have been developed. Data clarifies the professional role the LSAs have in the school but also the way in which the LSAs and teachers place importance on the way they communicate with each other.

Evidence from the LSAs themselves suggests that the role profile for the LSAs appears to be established in the school. This is a positive milestone for LSAs

who, until recently, have had little prospect of career progression and professionalism. This milestone gives LSAs a professional dimension to their role, in its own right. Analysis of findings from the interviews and questionnaires undertaken by the LSAs reflected the study carried out by Trent (2014) examining the deployment of LSAs. A crucial outcome of Trent's study highlighted the integral need for LSAs to be presented with opportunities with which to develop their own professional identity and status in a school. Interestingly, the LSAs shared their experiences of how they were supported by teachers and senior leaders, with reference to the school's policies such as the Code of Conduct, and policy for Continuing Professional Development. When interviewing both the teachers and senior leaders, this model of development was paralleled, with some discrepancies with CPD, which will be discussed later in this chapter (RQ3).

### **6.2.2 How do LSAs develop their professional identities?**

Thinking deeper into the way in which an individual develops a professional identity we consider the characterisation by Edmond and Hayler (2013) that professionalism claims to encompass work identities defined through the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Therefore, the opportunities that are presented to the LSAs in acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to fulfil their role have been examined. Reflecting upon the skills and knowledge the LSAs believe to be integral to their role, showed that each LSA was able to detail the opportunities they had been given to enable them to successfully develop these skills. Further, they described occasions where they had been required to share their expertise with their colleagues and even reflect on situations involving challenges they had faced (Edmond and Hayler, 2013). This idea of sharing professional knowledge was a theme which was revealed throughout the questionnaires and interviews for the LSAs, the teachers and the senior leaders.

The idea of "inter-professional" (Floyd and Morrison, 2014) is particularly relevant for the LSAs in the school. During the interviews with the LSAs, and confirmed by the teachers and senior leaders, a vital role of the LSAs is the ability to adapt and change according to the expectations placed upon them. What was found,

in this study, was that several of the LSAs took on the role of the teacher, in the absence of the teacher, leading the class for sessions, or days. When thinking about what it means to be “inter-professional”, what became clear was that the LSAs are extremely skilled in knowing what to do and when to do it, for example, when to take the lead and when this is not required. This is also true for many of the LSAs who reported occasions when they were required to liaise with professionals such as physiotherapists and speech therapists as part of their role, further developing their professional integrity to work across professions. Furthermore, this skill was praised by the senior leaders and teachers and was rewarded through potential promotion from a Grade 2 to Grade 3 whilst supporting the professionalism of the LSA.

The knowledge of professionalism held amongst the LSAs and the idea that they are professionals was not only visible within their self-reflection, but was also represented through the way they conducted themselves during the interviews demonstrating professional integrity. Despite at times some ill-feeling towards the senior leaders, throughout the questionnaires, and particularly the interviews, the LSAs spoke with professionalism and respect to their colleagues and the school in which they work. It is apparent that both the teaching staff and senior leaders hold high regard for the LSAs and have much respect and ascribe a lot of value to their role in the school, a theme that came through strongly in the interviews. Careful consideration by senior leaders has taken place over recent years on to how to support the LSAs in the development of their professionalism.

The perception of professional integrity was comparable amongst the teachers and senior leaders. Observed through the interviews with the teachers was a different perspective of professional integrity, whereby questions were raised with regard to the way in which senior leaders conducted themselves, creating discussion around the value of professional integrity. This is supported by the majority view of teachers that professionalism has much to do with the way in which a person conducts themselves, also taking into consideration that the LSAs are individuals. Senior leaders had similar views, with specific examples of how professional integrity lies in understanding the role each member of a team has and the individual responsibility of this role.

### **6.2.3 What do we know about professionalism in the school?**

What can be understood from this is that the school regards professionalism as very important and has taken steps to promote professionalism across all members of their staff team. When considering the commonality of professionalism and professional identities in the school, the ways in which this is portrayed by senior leaders and disseminated to teachers and LSAs has a significant impact on the perception of it. Previously, the role of LSA has been heavily scrutinised, with the lack of role profile and structure leading to misconceptions of the role. Through the interviews with the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders, each was able to reflect and evaluate the role of the LSA and the professional status that they hold. One question that stemmed from the literature review was an enquiry into whether the LSAs in this special school were encouraged to evaluate and reflect on their experience as a model for the development of a professional identity (Bleach, 2014). What has become clear from this study is that the LSAs in this special school are indeed encouraged to develop professional identities through such reflection, and that this is a process that the teaching staff and senior leaders appear to take part in themselves as well, both as a reflection of their own identity and that of their colleagues.

When reflecting on their own professionalism within the school, the LSAs shared their experiences of situations where they 'acted' professionally, or through characteristics they have. Key insight into the differences in ideals of professionalism have been denoted by Hoyle and John (1995) where they believe that it is imperative that the perception of the LSA of their own professional identities is important and that it is vital that it is accepted by those within the culture, to reinforce their own identities. Professionalism is not simply a matter of recognition of formal qualification but of the characteristics held by an individual. This change in thinking has been accepted within this special school and it has created a culture whereby the LSAs are able to believe in themselves as professionals and to have their own professional identities.

More crucial to this endeavour is the perceptions held by members of SLT and the teaching staff as these can help to truly embed and embrace the notion of

professionalism across the school as a whole. Differences in experience into the role each has in the school supports Evans' (2008) suggestion that there are different meanings to the term "professional", with a greater acceptance that being linked to a profession enables an individual to be described as a professional, rather than the definition that was previously based upon the training and accreditation received by the individual.

Concurrently, what is already known is that teachers undertake training as a stepping-stone into the profession and a key part of developing a professional identity is from training and qualification, as well as opportunities such as sharing expertise from colleagues presented early in a teacher's career (Pitula, 2012). Further, it has already been determined that LSAs currently have no formal expectations of National qualifications for the role, such as the teaching standard QTS, so this case study sought to understand whether the LSAs were able to achieve professional identities, given the current limitations to the status of their role. Despite varied levels of previous experience for LSAs entering the role in the school, each LSA receives a consistent induction as part of their initial training.

The LSAs have undergone initial training, which involves qualifications-specific to the role they have in this school, for example Manual Handling, Epilepsy training, Makaton. These are skills and qualifications that they would be able to transfer to another school setting. There is importance placed upon ensuring that the LSAs have undergone sufficient training in order to enable them to fulfil their role successfully. It is unlikely that relevant school policies and training schedules are a reflection of the changes that have taken place as a consequence of the DISS-Study (Blatchford, et al., 2009); rather, more as a necessity to support the pupils in the school appropriately. Regardless, the significance of this structured induction process and training is that it indicates a model of training expectations for the LSAs that reflects the essential teacher training undergone by teachers, offering more professional status to the LSAs and drawing parallels, enabling LSAs to develop their professional identities. Training will be more critically scrutinised later in this chapter examining CPD (RQ3).

#### **6.2.4 How do LSAs perceive their role and their professional identities within an English special school? How do the teachers and senior staff perceive the role of the LSA in the school?**

Evidence from the LSAs' own perception of their role in the school and the determination evidenced to separate professional and personal aspects of their personalities within the working day, as well as confirmation from teachers as to their own role and that of the LSAs provides insight into how the LSAs have been able to develop their own professional identities.

A fundamental strength of the LSAs is the professional integrity that they hold, with particular reference to their work ethic. A strong belief in the role and qualities held by professionals and defining themselves as professionals was evidenced in the questionnaires. The LSAs commented on their personal perceptions of the qualities they hold that reflect their professional status. These qualities include a shared work ethic; accepting responsibility for their actions and decisions; undertaking training; and aspects of respect and conduct such as language used, working reflectively.

The idea that the development of a professional identity relies on several factors, including background and personal biography, and that an individual is able to control the impression they have upon others (Weinberger and Shefi, 2012; Goffman, 1959) resonates when discussing LSAs. In their own portrayal of their professional identities particularly when describing conflicts or difficult situations with their colleagues, the LSAs demonstrated an understanding of the layers within an individual and awareness of this in different situations.

Senior leaders showed respect for and acknowledged the need to support the LSAs and recognised the value and importance of the role they have. The theme of communication that emerged through the questionnaires and interviews with the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders had mixed responses. The way in which the LSAs and teachers communicate appeared to be effective, however at times the LSAs felt that strategies and policies were not communicated well from SLT. This caused some mixed feelings about how much they are valued in the school.

The perspective of the SLT with regard to communication differed, with their opinion focusing more upon the organisation of the school. This is discussed in more detail in relation to RQ4, in a subsequent section.

Conclusions from the DISS-Study (Blatchford, et al., 2009) found that formal recognition of the impact of support staff plays a significant role in enabling them to develop professional status. Systems in place in the special school to recognise this need include the induction process for all staff, the introduction to more formal role profiles and opportunities for progression through an interview process. This mirrors national systems that are in place for teachers as they progress from NQTs to expert teachers and apply for Threshold. Threshold is a term used to describe teachers moving through the Teaching Standards from the Main Pay Scale to Upper Pay scale.

Therefore what can be seen in this case study school are many traits of professionalism that are present within the LSAs shown through the themes of professional integrity, sharing professional knowledge, value and respect, and communication, all of which emanated from the questionnaires and interviews. Whilst not nationally recognised as formal criteria for entry into the role of LSA, the school provides a series of training expectations that each LSA completes as part of their initial training into the role, and enables them to be successful. Senior leaders and teachers support LSAs in several ways to enable them to develop their professional identities. These include the role descriptions; the potential to progress from a Grade 1 to a Grade 3; and the pay structure as well as school policies that underpin the LSA role.

The initial training, alongside the role descriptions, potential to progress from Grade 1 through to 3, LSA pay structure and school policies cement these traits, and enable the LSAs to develop professional identities in their role, where they are supported by the senior leaders and teachers.

### **6.3 Continuing Professional Development (RQ3)**

- Q3. How do LSAs perceive and experience Continuing Professional Development within the school and what are their development needs?

Research tells us that professional development is a journey and requires individuals to reflect upon their learning experiences (Banks and Shelton Mayes, 2001). When thinking about the continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities presented by a school we must consider all activities involving the sharing of knowledge, including the use of INSET, courses and mentoring (Craft, 2000). Therefore, during this section of the case study, various inputs are considered as aspects of CPD. For the purposes of this study, CPD includes specific training such as in-house opportunities; external courses; and learning through experience. This could be both formal and informal (Kennedy, 2011) and would take into account the school's understanding of CPD, which has stemmed from the themes of qualifications and experience, sharing professional knowledge and training.

### **6.3.1 The role of CPD in the school**

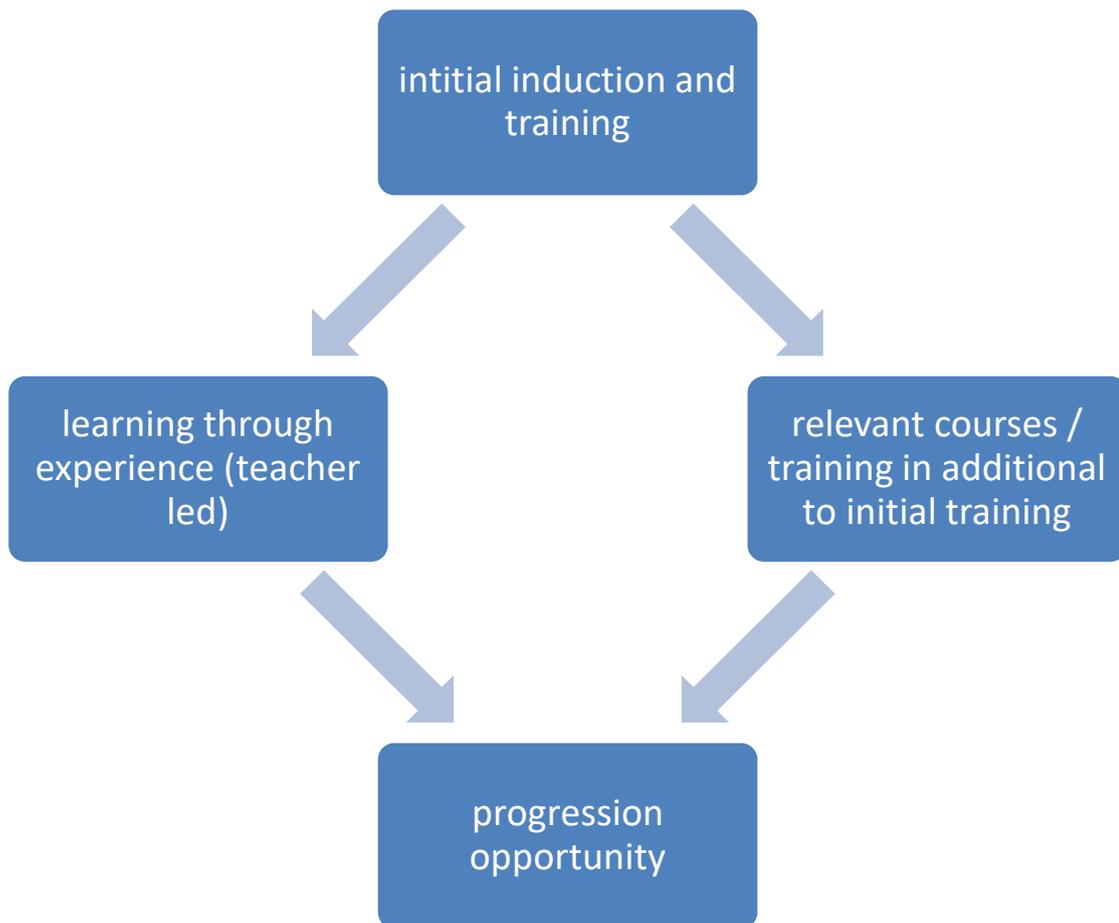
Bearing in mind that the purpose of CPD is to move a person on with their skills and knowledge, a significant element of this case study was to examine how one special school is able to achieve this, with a particular focus on the LSAs. To begin this exploration, we will consider the priorities placed on CPD from the perspective of the senior leaders, who will have a role in the decision making process of the CPD structure, thinking about how CPD is presented in the school.

Starting with the Performance Management Policy and the CPD Policy, written by members of the senior leadership Team, evidence suggests that time has been spent on these crucial documents to ensure that teachers, as well as LSAs, are supported in their professional development. A key aspect of this lies within the formal role profiles that are in place for the LSAs at each level from Grade 1 to Grade 3, where there are slight differences in what is expected from LSAs at each level. For LSAs, role profiles for their relevant 'level' have been put together as a starting point for them to reflect on their own performance and to establish goals for improvement. Both policies reflect clear guidelines and with a solid foundation provided by the initial training that was praised throughout the questionnaires and interviews by the LSAs; CPD is truly valued in the school.

From the outset, the qualifications and experience of the LSAs who participated in the study there was a mixed level to which they had attained, but on the whole most achieved college level qualifications. Examination of this reveals the continued variable starting place for the LSAs entering the role.

However, despite the current lack of career structure which the literature shows has been linked to LSAs feeling undervalued and demoralised (Farrell, et al., 2000) and the lack of progression for LSAs nationally, the school appears to have overcome this with carefully worded school policies to include LSAs as part of the school development process, alongside the teachers. Not only does this overcome some of the key issues raised by LSAs across the country, but also presents the LSAs with a sense of purpose within the school and by definition ignites a sense of feeling of professionalism within the LSAs (Mulvey, 2013). Further, in achieving this successfully, there is a model for development for LSAs and they are provided with similar opportunities to engage in CPD alongside their teacher colleagues.

Further, systems have been put in place to offer the LSAs a sense of training in line with that of their teacher colleagues. The figure below details the structure of progression for LSAs, as understood by the researcher from the interviews with senior leaders, and is representational only.



**Figure 6.2: Model of CPD for LSAs**

What has been understood from this study, from the point of view of the senior leaders, is that priority is placed upon ensuring that the LSAs are provided with CPD opportunities. This includes providing an initial training package to enable them to be successful in their role, where a greater emphasis of CPD is placed in learning through experience and sharing professional knowledge.

Unpicking the model, the initial induction and training entails relevant training to initially upskill the individual to fulfil their role profile, including statutory school-based training such as Manual Handling, Safeguarding and Team Teach. Much of the CPD from this point revolves around learning through experience, which is often teacher led and supports the LSA in their progression through the Grades. It seems, from the interviews, that much of the further training courses are school

specific, for example related to the School Improvement Plan, or further statutory training, as opposed to training for an individual to meet an individual outcome.

### **6.3.2 What are the experiences of CPD for the LSAs?**

Data from the questionnaires revealed the focus of the training opportunities presented to the LSAs, both as part of their initial training as well as through progression opportunities. As previously stated, the nature of these training opportunities includes the medium of in-house training; external courses; learning through experience and sharing professional expertise. This encompasses Craft's (2000) definition of CPD covering a wide range of professional development to provide the LSAs with the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful in their role.

The data from the questionnaires determined that the initial training that the LSAs received as part of their induction covered the following aspects of their role: to support pupils in behaviour management, speech and language development and medical / care. The training is mostly provided in-house with recognition of the training given through a qualification which many of the LSAs listed as part of their qualifications at the beginning of the questionnaires. During one interview, an LSA spoke about one element of their role as a trainer for one of these training courses. The focus of the initial training is pertinent to all members of the school's staff team from LSAs to teachers and senior leaders. This shared starting point for staff is outlined in relevant policies and draws upon similarities amongst the staff, which is not always true in different settings such as a large mainstream secondary school. Having opportunities to engage in shared training experiences as a whole staff team provides staff with shared experiences of shifting from novice to expert as outlined in Berliner's (2001) model, learning together and developing their skill-set as a whole.

Therefore, the journey that not only the LSAs but also the teachers and any new senior leaders to the school will take as they embark on their career acts as an internal mutual experience. Learning through shared experiences and creating a supportive network can act as a buffer to overcome differences in interest and enthusiasm towards CPD (Mistry, et al., 2004). The induction training is based

upon requirements specific to the school. Taking into account the way a school is able to ensure its staff perform at optimum level, the focus for the current induction training that is in place supports the staff to achieve this, and in turn promotes CPD in the school (O'Neill, 1994 in Bush and West-Burnham).

Further to the initial training that is in place for the LSAs at the present time, another focus is on the area of support in teaching for pupils. The structure of this training is more specifically focused on the sharing of expertise, skill and knowledge within the class teams. The complex nature of individual pupils and mixes of pupils within a class suggests that this strategy is the most effective in up-skilling individuals as it would be challenging to create a training session that would include the different pupils and teaching styles of the teachers.

The respondent LSAs shared positivity towards learning through experience, and during the interviews some of the LSAs described opportunities they had been given to share their own knowledge and expertise with their colleagues. Careful consideration needs to be taken, however, when using this form of training as challenges can arise when an individual cannot be expected to be successful in their role if they have not been given the proper training and guidance (Mistry, et al., 2004). Levels of trust need to be placed upon those providing the expertise, which was validated during the interviews with the senior leaders, who were passionate about professional development focusing on people's strengths. Alongside this, when examining the outcomes of CPD, other aspects should be considered as well as the increased skillset and knowledge that stems from undergoing training. Such outcomes include those that have undergone the CPD will feel valued and will be prepared to anticipate changes to their work, when training is relevant to those changes, and it is worth noting that these outcomes are as valuable as developing staff competency (Bradley, 1991).

Senior leaders have a clear vision of how they believe they can support LSAs in their professional development. Senior leaders hold value and importance in specific training opportunities, both in-house and through external courses. However, it appears that greater value is placed upon the idea of sharing professional knowledge. Senior leaders and teachers take time to offer opportunities for the LSAs to gain knowledge and skills through experience, with

senior leaders placing trust in the teachers to have a positive impact upon their colleagues. CPD in the school is managed by senior leaders with the School Improvement Plan (SIP) outlining focus areas for development. The SIP identifies key areas for development to ensure that classroom and professional practices are relevant to the school. Within this is supervision from senior leaders and teachers to verify that any training undertaken is generalised into everyday practice (Glover and Law, 1996; Miller and Watts, 1990).

The idea of learning through experience and by 'doing' was described by senior leaders as a stepping stone in the LSAs' career progression. Figure 6.2 indicates the 'progression opportunity' for the LSAs, which involves the LSAs undertaking an interview to demonstrate the skills that they have acquired, thus acting as a strategy to encourage the LSAs to build on their skills and knowledge prior to the interview. What became evident through the questionnaires and interviews, however, was that there were still limitations placed upon the CPD in the school. Feelings shared by some of the LSAs shed light on what they perceived as restrictions to their own personal professional development. Much of the training that is in place and the learning through experience has been led by senior leaders and teachers to a certain extent, with specific expected outcomes.

### **6.3.3 What are the development needs of the LSAs?**

Whilst the CPD opportunities, particularly initial training is a strength of the school there remains some room for improvement for the LSAs. Although there is a system in place where staff are able to apply for training that they believe would benefit the school, the system is overseen by a member of SLT and a decision made by the SLT as to whether the LSA is able to attend the (external) training course. Some of the LSAs expressed feelings that they have limited opportunities for progression, particularly when they have reached the top level (Grade 3) of their role. The impression that was felt by the researcher of the LSAs that they are feeling stagnant to some degree in their role. This has the potential to leave LSAs feeling that they are not part of the (whole school) team, undervalued and with limitations to progression in their role, unmotivated to progress (Farrell, et al., 2010; Stoll, 2007). During their interviews, senior leaders explained that

training opportunities must be reflected in the School Improvement Plan; the feelings of the LSAs towards their progression poses a challenge for senior leaders with mixed understanding of CPD in the school. This does not appear to have been shared with the LSAs and has led to a lack of positivity towards their own CPD. This reflects previous research that LSAs feel undervalued and demoralised, often as a consequence of low pay and low perceived status (Hammett and Burton, 2005). In this case study, the LSAs believe that the opportunities they once had have been stripped away, possibly due to money. Closer inspection reveals that whilst a model has been put in place to support the LSAs in their progression, there continues to be limitations to this progression. These are to a certain extent beyond the control of the senior leaders as these are limitations placed upon the career structure for LSAs which are outside of the school's control.

Much of the training that is involved in the initial training for the LSAs requires annual refreshers through INSET days, and twilight sessions in order for them to validate the qualification. This has an impact upon the amount of time that remains available during INSET days and staff meetings for other areas of training and development.

The perception, therefore, of the training process that is in place is mixed. Many of the LSAs agreed that the initial induction training they had enables them to be successful in their role and is valuable, whilst sharing knowledge and expertise appears to be mutually beneficial, with positive feedback given. However, the long term CPD opportunity horizon that appears to be presented to the LSAs has its limitations and has been the cause of some negative outlooks towards career progression. This can contribute to the way people feel valued (or not) (Bradley, 1991).

Moving forward, therefore, to the development needs of the CPD experience for LSAs, the implementation of the LSA role profiles, and clear guidelines in policies within the school and the induction process are strengths of the CPD currently provided by the school. The discrepancies felt at the present time by the LSAs lie in the further development of their career progression. Steps are in place to enable the LSAs to move from Grade 1, to 2 and up to 3, however, once there,

the LSAs explained that there were little further opportunities provided other than to train as a teacher.

Nevertheless, putting this into perspective and with the lack of formal career progression currently available for schools across England, the challenge lies in how to support the LSAs in their development. Aside from undertaking the qualification to become a Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA), which appears to be an option the school are not currently choosing to take, there are no 'next steps' for LSAs. Therefore, it is felt that it is the responsibility of the school to consider effective strategies that can be put in place to further enable the LSAs to develop in their own career journey.

Exploring the non-statutory training opportunities for the LSAs and further developing their own model of CPD has the potential to open the school as a hub for supporting other schools, particularly special schools, in their own professional development opportunities. What can positively be seen in this school's model for CPD is great strength and trust in the staff to support each other in their professional development in a model of learning through experience. Despite LSAs misunderstanding this lack of support at times, there is respect and trust from between the senior leaders and teachers and LSAs to share expertise and develop individuals competently. What is also apparent from this model is that shared expertise and experience can be far greater than attending training as a strategy to ensure that skills and knowledge are embedded into everyday practice (Miller and Watts, 1990) with good practice overseen by the senior leaders (Mistry, et al., 2004).

#### **6.4 Organisational Culture (RQ4)**

Q4. To what extent is a shared vision, or ethos, promoted within the school to develop a collaborative organisational culture?

Examining the school as a whole management culture entails understanding the shared assumptions and takes into account the importance of people and their interpretations (Schein, 2010 and Alvesson, 2002). Therefore, the shared vision of the special school was examined through the school's policy documents and during the interviews with the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders. The most

consistent response throughout the interviews, and a mantra weaved into the school vision, is the focus on the pupils. The pupils are at the heart of the school and this is embedded throughout the policies and responses given by all the participants. In order to answer this research question the following themes help us gain a greater understanding of the organisational culture that is present in the school: value and respect, communication, organisation and high expectations.

#### **6.4.1 Vision, values and respect**

What is clear from this study is that, although not necessarily formally, the school's vision is shared amongst all the staff and has a significant role in the running of the school and the beliefs of the staff working in the school.

In addressing this research question, the theme of value and respect shone through the perceptions of the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders, yet also shed light upon their contrasting perspectives. The position held by the LSAs, from their own perspective, was interesting. Despite measures being put in place by senior leaders and disseminated by the teaching staff, there were very different perspectives on a feeling of value and respect between class teams and as a whole organisational culture.

Further examining the concept of value and respect in terms of the shared vision and ethos of the school, the leadership of the head teacher is often the driver that influences and impacts on the culture of the school (Harris and Bennett, 2001). When referring to the senior leaders, there were discrepancies with the way the LSAs felt valued and respected, compared to the value and respect between the LSAs and teachers. Sub-cultures can form because of differences in beliefs and views, and whilst it appears sub-cultures have formed in the school, it is unlikely to be due to differences in visions (Tuohy, 1999). Tuohy (1999) describes sub-cultures as interlocking systems, however when there are differences in values or visions, these sub-cultures do not interlock and problems can occur. With the pupils at the heart of the school's vision, a message which shone through all respondents, it is not likely that there are differences in visions amongst the sub-cultures, and that differences between the staff causing some mismatching with

the interlocking systems is not as a result of differences in the school's vision amongst the staff.

Rather, the formation of sub-cultures in the school has developed because of the intricate working environments of the LSAs and the class teacher. Spoken about with high regard, the teachers were very well respected by the LSAs where there appeared to be a mutual relationship and the LSAs felt that they were valued as part of the class team. A fundamental aspect of this collaborative relationship is the shared ethos inherent within it where the class team is working towards the same goal (Nias, 1999). Through the questionnaires and interviews, it was suggested by the LSAs that the teachers took a variety of steps through their practice to ensure that the LSAs feel valued and respected. Examples include feeling appreciated by the teachers; being able to offer suggestions to planning and the organisation of the class; and respecting professional relationships. To a certain extent it is unsurprising that the relationships between the LSAs and teachers is closer than that of the LSAs and SLT as class teams establish a sense of mutual respect. A key difference in the relationships between the LSAs and teachers, and that of the relationships between the LSAs and SLT is that the teachers and LSAs spend significantly more time together in the working week. Naturally, working within the class team the LSAs and teachers will be working together with their own shared belief where they are required to work together to achieve a specific goal, whether this is for individual pupils or for the class as a whole. The shared belief within the class teams or sub-cultures will invariably be working towards the vision outlined by the head teacher (Fullan, 2001).

#### **6.4.2 Organisational Culture**

Looking more deeply at the sub-cultures and the whole school culture, the position of the teachers in the organisational culture of the school lies between the LSAs and the senior leaders. This position creates a deeper understanding for the teachers of the two other viewpoints. What was portrayed through the interviews with the senior leaders was an overarching perception of the organisational culture, but with little recognition to the feelings presented by the teachers and LSAs. Thus creating the sub-cultures whereby the teachers have

direct experience of the feelings and perspectives of the LSAs. The culture that has been created amongst the teachers and LSAs reflects the intricate relationships between people, their interpretations within that culture and experiences of the people which creates that culture based upon shared assumptions (Alvesson, 2002; Schein, 2010). Therefore, what became apparent in the interviews was clear mutual relationships between the LSAs and the teachers, but more so a mutual understanding of feeling and the ability for the LSAs and teachers to interpret the feelings of their colleagues. Clear communication appeared to be present between the LSAs and the teachers within their sub-cultures, and mutual understanding of each other's roles within these sub-cultures. In this example, the sub-cultures refer to the class teams to include a class teacher and two or more LSAs.

As described by Wallace and Pocklington (2002), however, difficulties fall where these sub-cultures have their own beliefs and where views differ, creating incompatibility between these cultures. What appears to be present in this special school is not a lack of shared ethos, but rather a difference in opinion and perspective. As presented by the LSAs and teachers, their 'sub-cultures' arise from working closely together and from the mutual respect and support they share. Teachers and LSAs support each other in their roles, this includes pupil assessments, implementing behaviour plans, monitoring care plans, and carrying out activities for groups of pupils, these forming the fundamental strands of this collaboration. The perception of the LSAs towards the senior leaders differs considerably as a consequence of feeling undervalued by the SLT and broken communication systems. A theme that showed clear differences between the teachers and SLT from the LSAs perspective was the type and frequency of communication. From discussions with both the teachers and senior leaders with regards to the theme of value and respect, the teachers in particular were able to consider contrasting opinions and understand the different viewpoints of the LSAs and SLT, unsurprisingly given their position as a conduit between the two.

Thinking deeper into these sub-cultures, however, consideration ought to be taken towards the learning that occurs within these cultures. Wenger (1998)'s 'community of practice' theory leads us to rethink how individuals fit within sub-cultures. The close working relationships between the teacher and LSAs within

each class team reflects this idea that learning is continually taking place with no beginning or end. The interactions that take place between the teacher and LSA creates an environment to which learning and new thinking takes place, offers greater thoughts to the contrasts in relationships between the LSAs and the senior leaders, who in this instance would not be part of these 'communities of practice'. Different communities of practices would exist within the school, members of SLT would belong to some of them, with teachers and LSAs, but there would be other communities in which SLT would not belong, for example, class teams. Within each of these communities, individuals would have their own identity of self (Lave and Wenger, 1991)

### **6.4.3 How change has impacted upon the culture of the school**

Change has occurred in the school and this has also impacted on the organisation. Summarised by Fullan (2001), it is crucial to be prepared for sustainable change, where school improvement is an inevitable factor in any such organisation. The vital position of the teachers in the school among the sub-cultures and for building bridges between the LSAs and senior leaders has been theorised by Harris (2002) as the core strand to the process of change. Unsurprising therefore is the position the teachers have in terms of their ability to effectively mediate between the expectations placed upon them by senior leaders, and the support they are able to provide for LSAs in feeling part of the school organisation.

Furthermore, it should be recognised that even within a stable organisation, change can be challenging (Hopkins, 2007), and so whole school change is inevitably going to have a greater impact on the sub-cultures, than a smaller change would that might occur within the sub-cultures. What ought to underpin the nature of the change is their intrinsic value; that the changes will have a positive impact upon the quality and nature of the learning, with strategies in place to ensure that the structure of the beliefs and values of the head teacher are shared as part of the process of change (Harris and Bennett, 2001). What was seen, however, in the interviews, was that the LSAs, in particular, felt that the changes that were put in place were not embraced, and reluctance was felt

to embed these changes. What was emanated from the LSAs was that this reluctance to embrace the change rose from unclear communication from senior leaders, and misguided interpretations of the justification behind the changes.

Resistance to change may stem from individuals who are unwilling to adapt in their beliefs and mind-sets in order to support the leader (Fullan, 1992). The LSAs, however, are able to embrace change each new academic year when new class teams are formed, this often involves working with new colleagues and pupils that can change the dynamic of the sub-culture.

Whilst this change is annual, there is no way of determining how the changes will affect the sub-cultures. What is clear, however, is that the LSAs are well adjusted to this level of change and have the necessary skills to fit within the various sub-cultures of the school organisation; furthermore, the teachers help to embrace these sub-cultures collaboratively with the LSAs to have their shared vision (Nias, 1999; Earley and Bubb, 2007).

The difference with the change outlined within this thesis, is that the change is linked to school improvement, but limitations in the current CPD model leads to the LSAs being unable to cope with the change, as they may not have the skills necessary to transfer their previous knowledge and training to adapt to the change. Or, that new training is required to enable the LSAs to fulfil this change, and it is not being provided.

#### **6.4.4 Shared beliefs in the organisational culture**

The shared vision of the school is apparent, yet whilst it is clearly visible from an outsider's perspective, there are currently challenges in terms of the position held by the LSAs and the senior leaders within the organisational culture. Success has been achieved by the teachers in empowering the LSAs to develop their professional identities. This occurs within the class teams but the on-going misinterpretations surrounding their professionalism and progression leads to confusion for the LSAs. The hierarchy of the school leads to the negative feelings towards the senior leaders which is paralleled in the study by Lacey (2001), as findings from the interviews revealed that the LSAs felt that the expectations

placed upon them by SLT were at times unrealistic. Lacey's (2001) study found unclear expectations of LSAs and their role can lead to conflict. The main concern for the LSAs within this case study has been identified through inconsistent lines of communication between the LSAs and senior leaders which can act as a strategy to reduce conflict and uncertainty of the expectations of the Senior leaders. These expectations would include those linked to their role profiles, and support in undertaking and implementing change throughout the school. Further, a consequence of this, might increase the perceived status that LSAs have from senior leaders and raise morale (Hammett and Burton, 2005).

Further, in terms of their position within the whole school, the LSAs' perception is that their opinion is not respected by senior leaders with regard to policy changes and new incentives or strategies that are being implemented in the school. From the perspective of the senior leaders, however, insight was provided into the bigger picture of the whole school organisations, taking into account the differences in pay and responsibility. What appears to be a more accurate explanation to this inconsistency is that the senior leaders do not believe it is the responsibility of the LSAs to have responsibility for keeping abreast of national policy and how this impacts upon the school culture and ethos, rather than a lack of respect towards their opinions and perspective.

At times, it was felt that the shared beliefs of the school were mis-matched despite there being a clear sense of a shared vision amongst the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders believing that the pupils are at the heart of the school. It is likely that this has occurred as a result of the ill-feelings present amongst some of the LSAs towards the senior leaders. This has impacted on the understanding with which the LSAs have of the shared beliefs of the school and a misguided sense of place within the organisational culture (Nias, 1999). In practice, this is influenced by the nature of the workplace, and the individuals within it, with importance placed upon the role of the leaders (Kubiak and Sanberg, 2011). The shared belief amongst all staff is consistent and reflection upon this could act as a means for overcoming some of the current difficult or strained relationships that appear to be present within the school. This is with regard to the position the LSAs feel they have within the organisational culture of the school and to bridge the gap in communication between SLT and the LSAs that became apparent

during the interviews. Certainly, the senior leaders in their interviews did not reflect the same sense of position that the LSAs feel. The senior leaders did present a model whereby there was a clear difference in the role of the LSA and the teacher. To some extent this is valid, however in terms of professionalism and the pertinent role that LSAs have in the special school and the position they have within the sub-cultures, at times the profile of the LSAs could be raised by senior leaders to be included more within the organisational culture of the setting.

Many successes have been achieved in the organisational culture of the school with particular focus on the relationships between the teachers and LSAs. The teachers have adapted effectively in their position in the school, to work closely with the senior leaders in disseminating the school vision to the LSAs, and working closely with the LSAs to provide a shared moral purpose for the pupils in the school. Where problems have arisen is in the relationships between the senior leaders and the LSAs and the school would benefit from implementing strategies to overcome this to ensure that the overarching shared vision is clearly promoted across the school with all members of the school working collaboratively together. As well as this, the LSAs are able to successfully develop layers of their professional identities to fit within the role that is expected of them. What this means, is that the Grade 3 LSAs are incredibly skilful at working within the class team, or sub-culture led by the teacher showing mutual respect and meeting the required expectations for this aspect of their role. In addition to this, many of the LSAs and teachers share their professional knowledge to support their colleagues, as well as themselves in developing skills and knowledge to help them in their role. The LSA Grade 3s are also able to switch to the role of lead person within the class team in the absence of the teacher where their identities are influenced by the people within the culture and how the LSAs are able to perceive themselves (Case, 2008). The LSAs are able to take on two strands of their professional identities within the sub-cultures. This includes leading the shared beliefs of these sub-cultures, which focus on the pupils. Recognition of this strength in skill could be translated to the whole school context to offer further layers of hierarchy amongst the staff and act as a strategy for reducing the gap between senior leaders and the LSAs.

## 6.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the data from the questionnaires, interviews and policy scrutiny with members of staff working in the special school in relation to the conceptual framework. This has been achieved by comparing theory and gaining a greater understanding of the current shortcomings of previous research, thinking closely about the themes that emerged from the data.

The outcomes of this study have shown the benefits of the outcomes from the DISS-Study (Blatchford, et al., 2009) and the positive impact it has placed upon the deployment of LSAs in the special school. Whether or not it was consciously established by senior leaders as a direct result of the DISS-Study, certainly the implementation of the role profiles for the LSAs has affected their occupation and delivered new opportunities for them.

What has been gained from this research is a more insightful understanding of the complex relationships held between the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders revealed through their perceived understanding of the way they feel valued, respected and communicated with. Furthermore, there is a marked contrast between the perceived understanding of specific situations from the perspective of the LSAs to that of the senior leaders. This includes the role they have within the organisation. What can be learnt from this case study is that the dramatic change in the role that LSAs have has been underestimated in terms of their own professionalism. Despite many limitations to the control LSAs have in their role, LSAs have been successful in overcoming the challenges themselves, developing professional integrity and a sense of place within the organisational culture.

Previous research has led us to believe that the current lack of career structure for LSAs could be detrimental to the development of professional identities and sense of professionalism within their role. Alongside this, current theory suggested that the inevitable development of sub-cultures amongst the LSAs, including teachers in some instances, places the organisational culture in danger of impacting negatively upon the efficacy of the shared vision or ethos.

Established in this special school is a strategy that enables the LSAs to develop their own sense of professional identities with role profiles, and policies that outline performance management opportunities and progression similar to that of the structure that is in place for teachers. Whilst limitations remain at the present time, within this structure there is scope for development and it has its own success. LSAs are able to speak highly of their role in the school and demonstrate skills and knowledge to set them amongst their colleagues as professionals.

With regard to the continuing professional development opportunities presented to the LSAs, there are mixed expectations as to their own CPD that is not directly in line with the model in place at the present time. However, the LSAs are clearly well trained and believe that this training enables them to be effective in their role, covering a wide range of skills and knowledge. Highly skilled and knowledgeable LSAs share their expertise with colleagues, which is a valued achievement and further represents them as professionals in their own right within the school as well as undertaking specific training alongside their teacher colleagues.

What can be seen across the school are mutual training opportunities for the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders which act as a groundwork towards the shared vision and moral purpose present within the school. The foundations have been laid across the school to begin to implement a more collaborative organisational culture and, with further promotion from senior leaders to ensure this vision is clear, a more successful working relationship can be built between the LSAs and senior leaders. What has been recognised and encouraged throughout the school are the strong bonds between the LSAs and the teachers with senior leaders overseeing these sub-cultures. Provided the senior leaders are able to successfully endorse their vision for the school to the teachers, with the teachers empowering this vision within their class teams, success should follow.

Existing now, however, are challenges presented by the LSAs with their perception of the organisational culture and the position they have within this culture. A common consequence of change is reluctance to support that change, and a supposed lack of communication felt by the LSAs towards the change.

Over recent years, sizable changes have taken place in the school, mostly because of legislation delivered by the Government. This is an area of development for the school to work at, implementing steps that allow for the LSAs to be more adaptable to change, with senior leaders taking time to consider the impact of change on the staff and ensuring that the purpose of such change is understood through a more effective line of communication.

# Chapter Seven – Conclusion

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## 7.1 Introduction

Drawing this case study to its conclusion, a summary of the study in relation to the research questions will review what has been found and evidence its original contribution to knowledge, examining what we have learnt from this case study school. Further, implications and recommendations will be outlined, taking into account that evidence and findings from this case study at this point cannot be generalised. The reflection of the practitioner acts as an important strand of this study as they think closely about their own personal and professional development throughout this doctoral study.

## 7.2 Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the views of Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) about the role they feel they play in an English special school. Through this examination the role they have was explored from their own perception of their role, the way in which their professional identities have formed through the continuing professional development opportunities that they have been presented with, and how it has been embedded within the whole school organisational culture. Only by exploring these three interrelated concepts can we really understand the experiences of the LSAs in the school. To achieve this central aim, LSAs, teachers and senior leaders were at the heart of this thesis; their perceptions were sought through questionnaires and interviews, drawing parallels upon practices between them and establishing links to relevant school policy documents.

The main research question for this study was:

“What are the perceptions and experiences of LSAs in a special school in England and how are they perceived by teachers and senior staff?”

In order to address this over-arching question, the following questions underpinning the three key concepts of professional identities, continuing

professional development and organisational culture for this study from both the theoretical perspective and in practice are:

- Q1. How do LSAs perceive their role and their professional identities within an English special school?
- Q2. How do the teachers and senior staff perceive the role of the LSA in the school?
- Q3. How do LSAs perceive and experience CPD within the school and what are their development needs?
- Q4. To what extent is a shared vision, or ethos, promoted within the school to develop a collaborative organisational culture?

These research questions have been explored through the perspective of the LSAs, teachers and members of SLT and a greater understanding of these key concepts has been established. Whilst the numbers of participants was not as desired, valuable knowledge has been established from the key themes that arose from the data. Useful data was presented in the questionnaires where LSAs felt comfortable in responding, whilst the interviews offered clarity from the perspective of the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders.

### **7.2.1 Professional Identities**

Examining this concept in this case study, the LSAs established their own perception of what it means to be a professional and have been able to develop their own professional identities within their school setting. Akkerman and Meijer's (2011) definition of professional identities holds true for the LSAs as they have shared their belief in their role as a professional as expected from them by the senior leaders and teaching staff. The LSAs demonstrated examples of acting ethically and morally within their role (Carr, 2000).

Changes have taken place since 1999, when the Department for Education documented shortcomings in LSA career structure, and in 2003 when the longitudinal DISS-Study started (Blatchford, et al., 2009). This study examined the way LSAs were deployed in schools. These changes, to some extent, have been reflected by the LSAs in their responses as they revealed their feelings

towards the expectations put upon them by SLT, with changes including gaining professional knowledge and sharing professional expertise. Findings from studies, including Trent (2014), highlighted difficulties previously presented with LSA role profiles and discrepancies with LSAs' understanding of what is expected of them. Upon reviewing the school policies, it is clear there are more formal and consistent role profiles that have been established within the case study school, lending greater structure to their career path and to the expectations of the LSA role. This imitates the findings from the studies carried out by Bleach (2014) and Murray (2013), who found that internal and external factors played a role in practitioners acquiring professional identities. Therefore, the systems in place within this school, embedded in school policies such as the Performance Management Policy and the Continuing Professional Development Policy, have enabled the LSAs to develop their own professional identities.

An important first stage of the complex process of establishing the nature of a professional identity was understanding that a person may develop several identities that shape that individual as they acquire skills and knowledge in their role (Sutherland and Markauskaite, 2012; Pitula, 2012); furthermore, the way in which an individual develops from 'novice' to 'competent' (Berliner, 2001) will also be important, as they progress in their career and develop skills and knowledge. This plays particular significance when examining the LSAs as they progress from Grade one to two, onto three in their own current career structure, similar to that of teachers progressing through Threshold and into Senior Leadership positions. At this point, we can begin to understand how professional identities are initially formed, but also the way in which changes in a role within the school can lead to an individual changing the way in which they perceive their own professional identity at different stages in time.

More significant is the idea that LSAs who are working at Grade 3, in the classroom have two strands to their role. As established from the interviews with the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders, a greater understanding of this intricate role came to light when, in the absence of the teacher, a Grade 3 LSA is expected to lead the classroom and their LSA colleagues. This further shapes the complexities of their professional identities through significant variation of their role from one day to another. Berger and Luckman (1966), in their analysis of the

concept of 'actor', create an excellent argument for the desirability of this "consequence of self-experience" (pg 90) and of the subjective nature of an individual choosing which path of action is suitable and appropriate in a given situation. What was demonstrated, particularly, by the teachers and LSAs in their interviews, is how the LSAs described the way they are able to expertly switch their role and alter their professionalism to match the level of expectation placed upon them so as to be successful in their role in whatever way they are being deployed. In the example of Berger and Luckman's (1966) 'actor' theory this translates to the skills the LSAs have to play two different parts within their role as a Grade 3 LSA. That is to say that an LSA who is expected to lead the class for the day is able to achieve this in a professional capacity, yet also to act with professionalism towards the teacher when the teacher is in the class. This is a juggling act, which has cleverly been achieved and shared by the LSA Grade 3s in their interviews.

In order to understand how the Grade 3 LSAs, in particular, have been able to achieve this, we must take into account the changes that have taken place nationally, and specifically within the school ethos. A huge consequence of the shift in deployment of LSAs as an outcome of the DISS-Study (Blatchford, et al., 2009) and associated changes to legislation (DfE, 2003) have led to the previously-thought-of role of the LSA as 'helper' changing to encompass a clearer and more defined purpose in schools (Groom, 2006). Most significantly, this change in legislation required schools to reflect on their practice and the way in which LSAs are utilised in schools (Tucker, 2009). The interviews demonstrated that there is a formal process for LSAs that has been developed in this case study school that underpins professionalism and creates a career structure. This includes consideration of pay structure, which begins with the role profiles as LSAs enter into the profession in the school. Referring back to the meaning of the term 'profession', what this school has established is a role that enables the LSAs to be experts in their field (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010) where LSAs are able to meet the expectation of possessing specialist skills and knowledge (Professional Standards Council, 2007). The use of clear role profiles, which is particularly helpful in differentiating between each Grade, responds to Trent's (2014) findings, examining the difficulties LSAs were previously presented with in

understanding their role, and discrepancies with different role titles since the role has evolved from 'helper' (Groom, 2006). Following the need for the role and purpose of LSAs to be redefined (Blatchford, et al., 2012) as an outcome of the DISS-Study, what is invaluable in the case study school is that LSAs are provided with opportunities to progress in a structure outlined by the Local Education Authority (LEA) and adapted by the school to create their own model. Central to this is the ability for LSAs to meet the needs of the pupils and to support the teacher. In order to achieve this, training, clear job descriptions and performance management opportunities are presented. The school's Code of Conduct Policy outlines the characteristics the SLT believe all staff should present themselves with and this appears to be well established within the case study school. Further policies supporting the professionalism of the LSAs include the Performance Management Policy, Pay Policy and the Continuing Professional Development Policy, all of which outline that the LSAs are part of the staff as a whole, without differentiation between senior leaders, teachers and LSAs, creating a professional culture across the whole staff.

### **7.2.2 Continuing Professional Development**

The way in which LSAs are provided with initial training and subsequent continuing professional development (CPD), to develop knowledge and skills, was surveyed. The definition of CPD that underpins this study is based upon Craft (2000) and Kennedy (2011), where the approaches used to support teachers and LSAs in enhancing their skills and knowledge is categorized by formal, informal and structured learning opportunities.

Based upon theories that support professional development as a journey of continuous development, the purpose of scrutinising the opportunities presented to the LSAs was to draw comparisons between their experiences and that of the teachers and senior leaders so as to understand how the professional role of LSA is supported by the school. A secondary strand of this concept was to establish to what extent LSAs in the school are supported in their own CPD, what the training schedule looks like for them, and how this enables them to be successful and support their own career progression.

A crucial aspect of CPD within a school setting is ensuring that all layers of the organisation are presented with development opportunities, as this creates an inclusive environment whereby all members of the setting feel part of a team (Stoll, 2007). As previously indicated, many of the school policies that were reviewed showed a model where the senior leaders, teachers and LSAs are regarded as one entity, where standards and expectations were the same regardless of the role an individual has in the school.

Analysis of the questionnaires, and interview data, presented evidence that the role of the LSA within the school focuses on their skills, knowledge and the ability to support with improving pupil progress and performance. In order to achieve this, the school has set up a specific training programme that enables the staff in the school to meet their role profiles, and therefore support teaching and learning. The role CPD has in schools is to make a contribution to the skills and knowledge individuals have and therefore it is necessary for individuals to engage with these training opportunities to move from 'novice' to 'expert' in their role (Berliner, 2001). Specific outcomes for training must be clear, with the opportunities valued by those taking part (Bradley, 1991). On the whole, this was the case of the LSAs as they spoke about their training opportunities, with only a few disparities regarding opportunities for more personalised CPD.

The LSAs feel that a strength of the school is the initial training or induction package that has been put in place for them when they are new to the role, with many aspects of their job description and role expectations met in this training. Much of the training that takes place is relevant also to the teachers and senior leaders and therefore during this induction process, again, there is little differentiation between the roles, creating a whole school approach and reiterating the significance of working as a team. More importantly, what has been achieved by the LSAs is the ability to engage in a range of activities to develop their expertise through training and shared learning experiences (Craft, 2000). Some LSAs, where it has been relevant in their role, shared their experiences of training their colleagues, creating a professional learning community and ensuring that staff feel valued and respected (Hopkins, 2007).

The difficulty within this case study setting, however, is the shift in training opportunities that is not always presented to the LSAs during their training sessions, such as INSET days, once the induction process has been completed. What became clear during the interviews was that most of the training undertaken by the LSAs, and teachers, is based on an annual rotation of 'refresher' sessions to ensure training is up-to-date, with a high level of skill and knowledge maintained. However, as expressed by the LSAs and senior leaders, from their perspective of organising training and ensuring all members of the staff team have training that is 'in date', there are limited opportunities presented to them to develop new skills through training. This poses potential issues, when CPD does not contribute to individuals' development or opportunities are not presented to effectively support the development of skills and knowledge (Bleach, 2014). Limitations to the number of training days and hours within the school year becomes a juggling act for senior leaders to fulfil statutory requirements and up skill staff through school improvement priorities, and personal development opportunities.

What has become an expectation of teachers and senior leaders, again divulged from the LSAs, is a high regard for 'learning through experience', or sharing professional knowledge as an attitude towards progress and development for the staff. Senior leaders gave clear examples of the strengths of this strategy in their interviews. The perspective of the LSAs differed, however, as they showed a lack of motivation and enthusiasm towards their own CPD. A finding from this study shows an impressive model for initial induction and training for all staff to achieve good practice (Mistry, et al., 2004). However, the LSAs feel there is a significant reliance on them, and teachers, continuing their professional development through experience-driven learning. Discrepancies therefore exist in terms of the success in this school towards different types of learning opportunities between the LSAs, teachers and senior leaders as to the value of CPD presented to them. The LSAs demonstrate a misunderstanding in the value of learning through experience as a CPD opportunity and this is an area which the school could develop to strengthen their already successful induction training to ensure that the LSAs, in particular, are motivated to engage with purposeful and relevant training.

### 7.2.3 Organisational Culture

In this case study the third concept to be examined was the organisational culture of the school. Past knowledge of this concept showed that the organisational culture of the school plays a fundamental role in the importance of the people, their interpretations and experiences in shaping the culture of the school (Alvesson, 2002). The shared belief of the school, the professional development and the importance of reflective and meaningful relationships shapes the organisational culture and illustrates the connection these three key concepts have (Stoll, 2007; Reeves, et al., 2002). Lave and Wenger (1991) have outlined the notion of ubiquitous 'communities of practice', based upon individuals learning from those with greater experience and through the interactions they have with each other and the world. The culture that is presented within the school reflects this idea where the LSAs are able to work within the supportive group to work collaboratively towards a common or shared goal (Stoll, 2007).

Analysis of shared beliefs in schools has been misguided at times; however, more recent analysis has exposed the significance of collaboration and shared work ethic, with individuals working towards the same common goal (Earley and Bubb, 2007). Having shared beliefs and a shared ethos in a school setting has a positive and powerful impact upon the culture (Hopkins, 2007); however, when sub-cultures form as a result of gaps or flaws within this shared belief, they can be incompatible with and disrupt the organisational culture of the school (Wallace and Pocklington, 2002).

However, within the school, the relationships between the teachers and LSAs working in each class team arguably helps to develop these sub-cultures, particularly when learning and support takes place amongst the members of the team (Tuohy, 1999). Evidence for these sub-cultures is shown through the positive engagement the LSAs and teachers had during the interviews when speaking of their colleagues. The close working relationships that the class teams have and the mutual respect they demonstrated include the experiences they share within these sub-cultures (Alvesson, 2002). For example, working at a rate everyone was happy with [interview with Jack]. Further, the sub-cultures the LSAs described appear to be successful within the class teams as they work

towards a shared belief, working collaboratively and effectively (Kydd, et al., 2003). However, potential challenges arose within these sub-cultures when the expectations placed upon teachers, and in turn LSAs, became compromised due to conflicting opinions regarding feeling valued and the limitations the LSAs believe they have on their CPD opportunities. Alongside this, the lack of consultation on changes that have occurred in the school has also left conflicting feelings amongst the LSAs and a perceived lack of value (Hammett and Burton, 2005). At this point, the teachers expressed the pressure they believe they have as they are in the middle between the LSAs and SLT, experiencing both the positive impact that changes made by senior leaders have on teaching and learning but also appreciating the challenge and influence such changes can exert upon the sub-culture [interviews with Lucy and Sarah].

Change is naturally occurring, however, and apparent from the questionnaires and further detailed in the interviews is the importance of how people feel about change. It was evident that change was occurring in the school at the time of the interviews, with the LSAs expressing feelings towards this change. Their perspective indicated that they felt senior leaders instructed them that change was taking place, rather than feeling involved in the process of change. The teachers revealed similar feelings, however it appears there is more understanding of the necessity of the change. It has been theorised by Fullan (1992) that resistance to change can occur when individuals are unwilling to adapt their mind set but that changing school cultures can counteract this by providing CPD to enable staff to improve on practice (Hopkins, 2007). This can also occur when the professional learning community is not sustainable. This can be overcome through the dedication of time towards CPD and empowering staff in their own experiences of improving practice (Hopkins, 2007). What appears to be represented in the school is strong sub-cultures as part of the class teams, and a strong LSA sub-culture but as a result of the impact of change in the school, there are challenges within the interlocking sub-cultures (Tuohy, 1999). This could be due to the complexities of individual identities influenced by social, cultural, historical and political factors (Floyd and Fuller, 2014).

The danger lies when the impact of change on sub-cultures has a negative influence on the organisational culture, with there being potential for this situation

to arise within the case study school. Senior leaders revealed in their interviews that there was a broad consensus that change was taking place, but that they felt relevant support was in place to support this change and that the change was a consequence of shifting goals set outside of the school's control. The senior leaders should be mindful to ensure that differences in these perspectives do not impact negatively on the organisational culture of the school and cause role-related stress (Hammet and Burton, 2005; Day, Harris and Hadfield, 2001). This can be overcome by giving time to optimise relationships between teachers and LSAs to ensure teaching and learning for pupils is achieved (Lacey, 2001).

### **7.3 Contribution to Knowledge**

At this stage of the thesis, a reflection on the gaps in the literature will be reviewed to highlight the original contribution to knowledge that has been established through this endeavour.

Whilst previous studies have touched upon the role that LSAs in special education have in relation to the low perceived status of LSAs including the lack of pay progression, career structure and inconsistencies with their job title (Trent, 2014; Hammett and Burton, 2005; Dew-Hughes, et al., 1998), little research has been carried out directly within a special school, especially focusing solely on the impact of LSAs on the organisational culture, the development of their professional identities and the continuing professional development opportunities they are presented with.

The implementation of LSA role profiles, which outline the expectation for LSAs at each level from Grade one through to Grade three, acts as a way to support the LSAs in developing their professional identities. During the interviews with LSAs, teachers and senior leaders, it was revealed that LSAs were offered the opportunity to progress through these Grades offering a similar model to that of teacher progression and structure within the limitations of the LSA role. This structure of progression offers increased responsibilities for the LSA, such as the role the Grade 3 LSA described during their interview as having responsibility for taking the lead of the class in the absence of the teacher and planning teaching sessions. Using this example, LSAs felt they were offered professional status

within the school, bridging the gap from their previously considered role of 'unskilled helper' (Tucker, 2009; Groom, 2006)

A nationally accredited or specific 'essential' qualification, such as the QTS teachers must hold, does not appear to exist for LSAs or even a statutory skillset for LSAs offering consistency across the country and there continues to be little research focusing directly on the CPD opportunities presented to LSAs, particularly within a special school (McConkey and Abbott, 2011). This case study school has created a bespoke initial induction-training package for their LSAs. The school has adopted LSA role profiles to implement this training package and uses information from their School Improvement Plan (SIP) to create opportunities both through specific training and alongside the sharing of knowledge and expertise from teachers and other LSAs. Identified through this study, the training equips LSAs with the necessary skills and tools to fulfil their role profiles. This acts as a starting point for understanding the professional identities of LSAs through their training opportunities and CPD experiences and needs.

What has been unveiled within this study is a greater understanding of the bespoke training that both LSAs and teachers require to fulfil their role. Interestingly, teachers in the school, when newly appointed, have the same induction process, with the same training, which holds merit and advances similarities between the LSAs and teachers, making both feel part of the school team (Stoll, 2007). In addition to creating an environment that actively encourages the development of professional identities, a positive attitude towards self is present within the cohort of LSAs. The LSAs spoke of the wide range of tasks they carry out, supported by the teachers to develop their skills and knowledge. Therefore, this example of training, which includes course-based training, as well as having a focus on learning through shared experience and knowledge strengthens the argument for continued professional development for LSAs and the impact the CPD has (Fraser, et al., 2007).

The findings from this study suggest that professional learning communities exist within the sub-cultures of the school where LSAs and teachers work together. New knowledge lies in understanding the way that these sub-cultures fit together

within the organisational culture of the school and the shared beliefs within these cultures. The shared learning experiences of the LSAs and teachers in the training that has been provided by the school enables shared meaningful experiences within these cultures. The relationships they have developed within these sub-cultures support the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) whereby the LSAs and teachers learn from their experiences and give the individuals within these groups a sense of identity and a way of 'doing'.

The complex relationships and position that teachers and LSAs have within the organisational culture of a school has also been unpicked in this case study. Revealed in the questionnaires and interviews is an understanding of how the teachers support the LSAs in their acquisition of professional identities and how the LSAs fit within the organisational culture. The school has sought to provide CPD for the LSAs and the responses from senior leaders support the concept that LSAs are professionals in their own right.

This study aimed to explore how the role of LSA is perceived and experienced within a special school in England. The findings from this study suggest that LSAs perceive themselves as professionals and they have been able to justify this perception. LSAs appear to be deployed effectively, and it seems that they are provided with sufficient and effective training and they are very much part of the organisational culture of the school. Development needs of the LSAs, overall, are met with the shared vision and ethos of the school promoted. The three key concepts underpinning this study are inter-related and evidence is shown in this case study school. The LSAs felt they are able to develop professional identities, established through their initial training and the clearly outlined role profiles and responsibilities they have, and in particular the way in which they perceive their role within the organisational culture of the school. This, however, also adds to the complex relationships that form between the LSAs and teachers, and the LSAs and senior leaders with intricate sub-cultures forming within the setting. In highlighting key implications for professional practice and enabling middle and senior leaders to reflect upon their current approach to on-going CPD opportunities for LSAs, it is claimed that the findings of this study offer a contribution to education knowledge. This knowledge allows us to understand some of the more nuanced relationships between teachers, leaders and LSAs in

special schools which has hitherto not been explored. These findings have implications for training and development opportunities for staff at the school which may, although not claiming to be generalisable, be useful for people in similar situations and contexts.

## **7.4 Implications and Recommendations**

At the heart of this study was gaining an understanding of the perceptions of the LSAs and their position within a special school. A small sample of participants in one special school in England was obtained for this case study, so whilst the outcomes of this study have been enlightening and have provided a better understanding of professional identities, CPD and the organisational culture of the school, at this point it is not possible to generalise the findings. However, it is hoped that the results will provide an insight into the way that LSAs are able to develop professional identities and the perceptions they have of their role within the organisational culture of the case study school, which may be useful to others in similar contexts or researching in this area.

Given this case study has demonstrated the way in which the three key concepts, professional identity, continuing professional development and organisational culture interlink an implication for this study would be for schools to attempt to understand the various subcultures that exist within their organisations and explore how LSAs contribute to and experience these subcultures in different ways. Examining these intricate social dimensions may allow senior leaders to understand LSAs' roles and experiences better as this practice will allow for a greater depth of understanding of the complexities of the role and the many challenging and varied issues that LSAs face which are not always apparent "on the surface".

Interesting findings from this study also lie in new understandings of how LSAs can seamlessly and skilfully switch their professional identities from working alongside their colleague LSAs in support of the teacher, to leading the classroom overseeing and directing their peer colleagues. Thus, it would seem sensible to ensure that teachers and leaders draw on the skills and abilities of LSAs more often when discussing and planning learning opportunities for pupils

and staff within the school. Indeed, this study has shown that LSAs can offer a wealth of experience, but this resource of expertise is not always sufficiently drawn upon.

The LSAs in this study have demonstrated their ability to act professionally and engage with appropriate CPD opportunities despite continued discrepancies nationally with pay progression and career structure. Their engagement with CPD involves the development of skills and knowledge through an initial training package, which all staff participate in when they are new to the school. A strength of this approach lies in relation to the LSA job descriptions and role profiles, where many of the skills and knowledge they require to fulfil their role is met through this training. Alongside this, it is worth noting that the LSAs engaged with a range of activities including training and learning through shared experiences and every day practise. Whilst further opportunities to develop expertise in the role is offered to LSAs, particularly as they progress from Grade 1 LSAs to Grade 2 and up to a Grade 3 LSA with a greater role and increased responsibility, limitations were highlighted. This suggests that there are potential opportunities here for LSAs to be offered the chance to progress and develop into a teaching role. Thus, through careful consideration, greater career and progression opportunities for LSAs could be offered.

In terms of future research, a larger study to explore whether the results from this case study can be generalised through a bigger sample size, using both quantitative and qualitative measures, would be a sensible first step. It would also be interesting to explore the intricacies of these complex role and relationships within other settings. Therefore, another avenue for future research would be to undertake a comparison study between special schools and state schools to compare and contrast the findings between LSAs working in different contexts and organisational cultures. This in turn would allow for a greater understanding of LSA professional identities, and the opportunities they have to develop them in different settings. This would also lead to increased knowledge about what CPD opportunities would be beneficial for LSAs in a range of settings, which would ultimately lead to this crucial role being better supported and therefore have a positive impact on student learning and attainment.

In this chapter, the study's aims have been summarised, the original contribution to knowledge has been presented, and a series of recommendations put forward for practice as well as establishing future work to build theoretical knowledge in this area. This thesis will conclude with the reflections of the researcher on this study.

## **7.5 Reflections and Conclusion**

Throughout this endeavour my own attitude and perspective towards professional integrity as well as the value and respect afforded to colleagues, has been challenged and deepened. As a researcher, investigating the perceptions that LSAs have of their role and understanding their professional integrity led me to scrutinise my own professional integrity. During the interpretations of the questionnaires and interview transcripts, my own pre-conceived ideas of the LSAs' role and my own position in the school were re-negotiated. I began to question my own professional integrity in the role I have and the influence I have upon the LSAs in developing their professional identities. What became apparent during this case study is the role that teachers play in supporting their colleagues, both senior leaders and LSAs. Understanding the potential impact of the influential position that the teacher has in the special school is paramount, and understanding how they work closely with two cohorts of people within the organisational culture of the school. Reflecting on the role of the LSA within the setting and the way in which I am able to influence the development of their professional identity.

Gauging the depth of understanding into the perspective of senior leaders and their own role in the school greatly challenged my own assumptions of the role of SLT. Consequently, as both a researcher and a teacher I am now able to fully appreciate the significance of the role of senior leaders, and to understand better the process behind the decisions that they make and of changes that impact on the school.

Professionally, I feel better equipped to demonstrate a higher level of value and respect towards my colleagues. I believe in creating a classroom environment that engages and empowers the LSAs to think critically about their performance

and to consider their own professionalism in the work place. In addition, valuing and respecting the varied experiences of the LSAs and the impact this has upon their role, supporting them in developing their professional integrity and identity, is now of clearer importance. Further, the current limitations with professional development that have been raised as a consequence of this study, has led me to develop new ideas to share my own experiences and expertise with colleagues. Building on my experience of this doctoral research, my current role in school acts as a starting block for me to put in motion my own training schedule. This will be to enhance professional development opportunities for colleagues in relation to curriculum areas pertinent to my role.

Thinking about how I have developed as a researcher throughout this journey leads to reflection of a deeper understanding of the research process from developing a research question and designing a research project. The importance of fine tuning and fully understanding the field of research that I am interested in from an idea, to reading literature and re-reading literature has expanded my attitude and appreciation to a new meaning of critical analysis. Whilst initially, some methods were felt to be inappropriate for this study, on reflection further consideration to the different methods available could have proved beneficial in yielding a greater sample size. This could have included offering focus groups as well as individual interviews as some participants may have felt reluctant to take part in the study, but felt more comfortable in sharing the experience with a colleague. This would have increased the number of participants and therefore more rich data could have been collected offering deeper insight into the successes and issues raised by those that did take part. I believe I have a firmer grasp of the necessary skills to be a successful researcher, understanding crucial phrasing in questions and statements to unpick the meaning of what I have been trying to establish. I have developed perpetual patience and attention to detail. Since starting on my doctoral journey, I understand the true meaning of educational research and have the skills to develop a successful research project, using a mixed methods approach within the interpretivist paradigm.

Therefore, as a true reflection of this journey I believe I have developed personally, professionally and as a researcher. I have learnt valuable lessons

through the challenges that I have been faced with throughout this study and have developed my own area of expertise and knowledge in this field.

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# Appendices

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## Appendix 1: LSA Questionnaire

### Questionnaire for learning support assistants



**University of  
Reading**

Thank you for undertaking this survey which should take no more than 20 minutes to complete. The survey forms part of a study for the thesis in my Education Doctorate and is led by researcher Hayley Sae Kang from the University of Reading.

The aim of this project is to examine the experiences of Learning Support Assistants working in an English Special school.

The questionnaire is completely anonymous and you will not be asked for any details that will identify you. All data collected will be held in strict confidence and will only be used by myself for data analysis and subsequent publications.

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct.

If you have any questions about this research, before deciding to take part please email me at [H.SaeKang@pgr.reading.ac.uk](mailto:H.SaeKang@pgr.reading.ac.uk).

By completing this questionnaire, you are agreeing to your consent for your responses to be used for the purpose of research within the following study: A Case Study examining the experiences of Learning Support Assistants in an English Special school

In this questionnaire I am interested in learning about your thoughts and feelings towards professional identities, continued professional development opportunities and the school culture of the school you currently work.

1. How many years' experience have you got in your current role of learning support assistant in this special school (can be over more than one school)

Less than a year  1-2 years  3-5 years   
Over 5 years

2. What "grade" are you?

Grade 1  Grade 2  Grade 3  HLTA

3. Please list your qualifications below: (GCSEs, A-Levels, NVQs, Higher Education, etc)

Professional Identity

In this section I'd like to learn more about your perception of what it means to be a professional and your feelings about being a professional.

4. How often on average do you consult with outside agencies in your role (e.g. health professionals, speech therapists)?

- Never
- Once or twice a year
- Once or twice a term
- Once a week or more
- Every week

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. What is the nature of these consultations? (e.g. meetings, therapy sessions, etc)

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6. How often do you participate in pupil assessment of P-Levels and / or National Curriculum levels?

- Never
- Once a year
- Once or twice a term
- Once a week or more

7. In what aspects do you participate in pupil assessment?

Updating Individual Education Plans

Commenting on topic based learning

Setting targets

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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8. How often do you plan one to one or group activities for pupils?

Never

Once term

Occasionally – a few sessions throughout the year

Weekly – I regularly plan sessions for pupils

9. In what capacity do you liaise with parents / carers about specific pupil progress?

Written – e.g. reports, home school diaries

Verbal – e.g. parents' evenings, open afternoons

Verbal – e.g. telephone conversations, drop off / collection of pupil

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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10. How often do you have this interaction with parents / carers?

Never

Once a year

Once or twice a term

At least once a week

11. For the following qualities please state whether you agree or disagree that they define **you** as a professional

Quality	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree not disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Shared working ethic – working alongside the senior leadership team					
Ability to be flexible and adaptable					
Accept responsibility for your actions / decisions					
Use appropriate and correct language at all times (both verbally and written)					
Work reflectively, including accepting critical feedback					
Treat colleagues (in whatever capacity) with respect					
Undertake training which enables you to be successful in your role					

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

12. Do you believe it is possible to separate personal relationships / life from your professional working relationships during your working day?

Yes

Mostly

At times

No

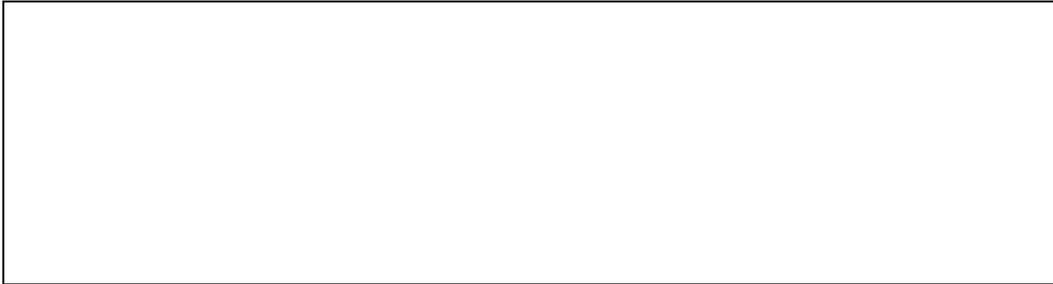
Other: (please state) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Any comments?: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

13. Do you have any comments about any of your answers to the questions in this section?

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the user to provide comments on their answers.

## Continued Professional Development

In this section I'd like to learn more about the professional development opportunities you have had within the school you currently work and the impact training has had on your ability to undertake your role successfully.

14. How much training have you received in your role?

- A great deal of training
- A moderate amount of training
- A little training
- I have not received any training for this role

15. Were you given any training by the school prior to starting your role or within 1 term that has enabled you to successfully fulfil your role as a Learning Support Assistant in the classroom?

Training	Yes	No
Support in teaching for pupils		
(If yes, from whom? Senior management, class teacher, LSA, from a specific person whose role it is)		
Personal care – e.g. feeding, changing		
(If yes, from whom? Senior management, class teacher, LSA, from a specific person whose role it is)		
Behaviour management e.g. Team Teach		
(If yes, from whom? Senior management, class teacher, LSA, from a specific person whose role it is)		
Play skills		
(If yes, from whom? Senior management, class teacher, LSA, from a specific person whose role it is)		
Alternative and Augmentative Communication (e.g. PECS, Makaton, eye gaze)		
(If yes, from whom? Senior management, class teacher, LSA, from a specific person whose role it is)		

16. What is the focus of training that **you** have had? (tick all that apply)

- Developing your skills to effectively support pupils in their learning
- Medical or personal care for pupils
- Behaviour management
- Development of play skills
- Communication with pupils
- Working as part of a team

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

17. How useful has the training you have received been to your role?

- Extremely useful
- Quite useful
- Moderately useful
- Slightly useful
- Not at all useful

18. Can you explain how the training was useful (or not)?

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19. How often do you have opportunities to attend external courses outside of the school's programme of training for your personal professional development?

- Never
- Once a year
- Once or twice a term
- Once a week
- If I apply for it

20. What training would help you in your role?

Developing your skills to effectively support pupils in their learning

Medical or personal care for pupils

Behaviour management

Development of play skills

Communication with pupils

Working as part of a team

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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21. Do you have any comments about any of your answers to the questions in this section?

## Organisational Culture

In this section I'd like to learn more about your beliefs and feelings towards your position and place within the school you currently work

22. Are you kept up to date with changes in policies and procedures within the school?

Yes

Mostly

At times

No

When it is relevant to my role

Any comments?:

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23. Are you given an opportunity to be involved in changes made to policies and procedures within the school?

Yes

Mostly

At times

No

Other:

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24. How enjoyable is your role?

Extremely enjoyable

Quite enjoyable

Moderately enjoyable

Slightly enjoyable

Not at all enjoyable

25. Can you describe what makes your role enjoyable? Or not?

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26. How effective is the Senior Leadership Team in the following?

Key roles	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Slightly effective	No at all effective
Promoting a shared vision of the school ethos					
Acting as a role model – leading by example					
Managing the daily running of the school					
Ensuring high standards of competency and conduct within the school					
Supporting all staff in their professional development					
Taking responsibility for the monitoring of high quality teaching and learning in the school					
Implementing a school improvement plan in line with the school vision					

27. How valuable do you feel these aspects of your role are in supporting the teacher of the class?

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	Valuable	Not very valuable	Not valuable
Working closely with the teacher to make pupil assessments					
Working closely with the teacher to monitor and update behaviour plans					
Working closely with the teacher to monitor and update care plans					
Plan and carry out activities for specific pupils / groups of pupils					

Any comments?:

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28. How frequently are **you** made to feel valued by the classroom teacher?

Daily – as a team and individually

Weekly – during team meetings

End of half terms

Once or twice in a year

Any comments?:

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29. How does the teacher show their appreciation?

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30. How frequently are **you** made to feel valued by the senior leadership team?

Regularly – a member of the leadership team will praise me personally

Sometimes – during whole school meetings as a group, but not individually

End of half terms

Once or twice in a year

Any comments?:

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31. Do you have any comments about any of your answers to the questions in this section?

32. If you would be willing to be interviewed about your experiences as an LSA in an English special school please provide your contact information below.

Thank you for your time. Please return completed questionnaires to Hayley Sae Kang by *date*

## Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet



**University of  
Reading**

Researcher: Hayley Sae Kang

Email: [h.saekang@pgr.reading.ac.uk](mailto:h.saekang@pgr.reading.ac.uk)

Supervisors: Dr Alan Floyd and Dr Cathy Tissot

Email: [Alan.Floyd@open.ac.uk](mailto:Alan.Floyd@open.ac.uk) [C.Tissot@reading.ac.uk](mailto:C.Tissot@reading.ac.uk)

### Information sheet

**Research Project:** A Case Study examining the experiences of Learning Support Assistants in an English Special school

**Project Team Members:** Hayley Sae Kang

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about the role professional identities play with in a special school, examining how groups of individuals work together.

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct.

#### What is the study?

The study is being conducted as part of the Education Doctorate (EdD) at the University of Reading. It aims to examine professional identities within a special school to understand how groups work together. The main purpose of this study is to identify what the perception of professionalism is amongst staff in the school taking the organisation culture and continued professional development (CPD) opportunities into consideration.

The study will involve teachers and learning support assistants who are currently working in the school.

#### Why have I been chosen to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the project because you currently work within a special school as a learning support assistant, teacher or senior leader. Participation in this project is completely voluntary.

#### Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether you participate. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any time during the project without any consequences to you by contacting the Project Researcher Hayley Sae Kang at the email address above.

#### What will happen if I take part?

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire that outlines your role as a teacher or learning support assistant. It will ask you to consider your perception of the role you have in the school with reference to the organisational culture, CPD and professionalism. This should take about 15 minutes to complete. Questionnaires can be completed through Survey Monkey or a paper copy can be provided (to be returned in a sealed envelope).

This will be handled in strictest confidence and will be completed anonymously. In completing the questionnaire you are agreeing to its use within the study.

Following the completion of questionnaires individual interviews will take place. This will allow the researcher to gain further information regarding your experiences working within a special school and enable you an opportunity to share your perceptions with the researcher in confidence. Interviews will be audio recorded so the researcher can give their full attention to you during the interview. Interviews should last no more than 45 minutes depending on the responses you give.

Questionnaires will be distributed by Hayley Sae Kang and interviews carried out by Hayley Sae Kang. By signing the consent form attached you are agreeing to your involvement in the interview part of the study. Participants for the interviews will be selected at random once consent has been received. If you agree to participate please return signed consent forms in a sealed envelope to Hayley Sae Kang.

*What are the risks and benefits of taking part?*

The information you give will remain confidential and will only be seen by the research members listed at the start of this letter. Information about individuals will not be shared with the school. Neither you; colleagues; pupils or the school will be identifiable in any published reports resulting from the study

Participants who have taken part in similar studies have found it interesting and we anticipate the findings of the study will be useful in understanding how professional identities are formed in special schools with consideration to CPD opportunities and the school culture.

*What will happen to the data?*

Any data collected will be held by members of the research project as listed above in strict confidence. Real names will not be used for this study or in any subsequent publications. All data collected will be held in strict confidence, kept private and stored on a secured password protected USB stick. There will be no identifiers linking you, the pupils or the school to the study. Participants will be assigned a number and will be referred to by that number on records. Once findings of the study have been written up, all data will be destroyed securely. A summary of findings will be available to you upon request and electronic copies of publications as a result of this study can be sent to you electronically if you wish.

*What happens if I change my mind?*

You can change your mind at any time during the research. If you change your mind after the data has been collected, I will discard your data and it will not be included in the study.

Who has reviewed this study?

This study has been reviewed following procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

Should you have any further questions please contact Hayley Sae Kang at the above email address.

I do hope you will agree to your participation in the study. If you do, please complete the questionnaire and the attached consent form. Please return it to Hayley Sae Kang in a sealed envelope

Thank you for your time.

### Appendix 3: Interview Schedule – LSA

<b>Research Question</b>	“What are the perceptions and experiences of being a professional for LSAs in a special school in England?”
<b>Introduction</b>	Introduce self and experience  Background of study
<b>Opportunity for LSA to introduce self and background</b>	Ask about experiences and role within the school
<b>Research sub-question 1 and 2:</b>  How do LSAs perceive their role and their professional identities within an English special school?  How do the teachers and senior staff perceive the role of the LSA in the school?	Quote: It is argued that “to be a professional is to provide a public service involving expertise whilst acting ethically” (Carr, 2000).  Could you tell me how you perceive your role?  What aspects of your role do you feel make you a professional?  What is your experience of SLT’s perceptions of your role?  Does this differ to how the teachers perceive your role?  Liaising with outside agencies can be part of your role – how confident in your role do you feel to do this?  Do you believe it is possible, or desirable to separate your personal life you’re your professional identity?
<b>Research sub-question 3:</b>  How do LSAs perceive and experience CPD within the school and what are their development needs?	How have you gained the skills to support the teacher with planning and assessment successfully?  In other aspects of your role – particularly to LSA Grade 3 – what opportunities have you been offered to enable you to be successful in your role?
<b>Research sub-question 4:</b>	A fundamental part of your role is the ability to work effectively as part of a team – can you tell me how this is achieved?

<p>To what extent is a shared vision, or ethos, promoted within the school to develop a collaborative organisational culture?</p>	<p>How do you overcome stressful situations and develop trusting working relationships with your colleagues? Teachers, and SLT</p> <p>Are you able to support your colleagues professionally?</p> <p>How are you made to feel valued and respected by your colleagues? Teachers, and SLT</p> <p>How do you feel changes in strategies, systems and policies in the school are communicated by SLT?</p> <p>Do you have any involvement in decision making and implementing changes / policies?</p>
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## Appendix 4: Interview Schedule – Teachers

<b>Research Question</b>	“What are the perceptions and experiences of being a professional for LSAs in a special school in England?”
<b>Introduction</b>	Introduce self and experience  Background of study
<b>Opportunity for teacher to introduce self and background</b>	Ask about experiences and role within the school
<b>Research sub-question 1 and 2:</b>  How do LSAs perceive their role and their professional identities within an English special school?  How do the teachers and senior staff perceive the role of the LSA in the school?	Quote: It is argued that “to be a professional is to provide a public service involving expertise whilst acting ethically” (Carr, 2000).  What comparisons can you draw on your professionalism and the professionalism of the LSAs with which you work?  What are your expectations of the LSAs in your class?  Do you think this differs from class to class? How so?  Does this expectation differ to the expectation SLT have of the LSAs?
<b>Research sub-question 3:</b>  How do LSAs perceive and experience CPD within the school and what are their development needs?	Can you tell me how you support the LSAs to meet the expectations of their role?  How do SLT support the LSAs to be successful in their role?  Leadership and management are integral parts of your role. How have you been able to develop your leadership skills?  When new strategies are implemented in the school – how are you able to develop the necessary skills / knowledge to be successful?  What do you feel is the priority for CPD in the school?  What CPD opportunities have you had to develop your role?

<p><b>Research sub-question 4:</b></p> <p>To what extent is a shared vision, or ethos, promoted within the school to develop a collaborative organisational culture?</p>	<p>How do you show your value and respect for the LSAs (in your class, and across the school)</p> <p>How do SLT develop relationships with the LSAs to show their value and respect?</p> <p>When changes have taken place in the school – how much involvement have you had in the decision making and / or implementation of these changes?</p> <p>How are these changes communicated amongst staff? (differ between teachers and LSAs)</p> <p>Working as part of a team – two strands: leading teams in classes and being led by SLT</p> <p>Have you ever felt challenged by this position in the school?</p> <p>What strategies did you use to overcome these challenges?</p>
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## Appendix 5: Interview Schedule – SLT

<b>Research Question</b>	“What are the perceptions and experiences of being a professional for LSAs in a special school in England?”
<b>Introduction</b>	Introduce self and experience  Background of study
<b>Opportunity for teacher to introduce self and background</b>	Ask about experiences and role within the school
<b>Research sub-question 1 and 2:</b>  How do LSAs perceive their role and their professional identities within an English special school?  How do the teachers and senior staff perceive the role of the LSA in the school?	Quote: It is argued that “to be a professional is to provide a public service involving expertise whilst acting ethically” (Carr, 2000).  What comparisons can you draw on your professionalism and the professionalism of the teachers and LSAs with which you work?  Are there policies in place the outline the professional conduct and expectation for the staff?  How do you feel about cross overs in personal and professional relationships that may form amongst the staff?  How are the expectations of LSAs, and teachers expressed?  Do the expectations for LSAs and teachers differ?  How are you, as a Senior leader, able to monitor these expectations?
<b>Research sub-question 3:</b>  How do LSAs perceive and experience CPD within the school and what are their development needs?	Some LSAs are expected to lead the class as part of their role – how are they supported to achieve this successfully?  As a senior leader how have you developed your leadership skills?  How do you support your colleagues to develop their leadership skills?  Do you feel it is equally important for the LSAs, teachers and yourself as SLT to have

	<p>opportunities to attend professional development?</p> <p>What are the current CPD priorities in the school?</p> <p>Are LSAs supported in their professional develop, is this evident in policies?</p> <p>What opportunities do individuals have to develop expertise?</p> <p>How are LSAs supported to provide at least 'good' teaching and learning opportunities for pupils?</p>
<p><b>Research sub-question 4:</b></p> <p>To what extent is a shared vision, or ethos, promoted within the school to develop a collaborative organisational culture?</p>	<p>What policies, if any, are in place to support members of staff with personal, non-work related matters that may impact on their work?</p> <p>How are LSAs, and teachers made to feel valued and respected in the school?</p> <p>As a Senior leader, part of your role lies in making decisions for the school and ensuring these are implemented successfully. How are teachers, and LSAs supported in implementing these changes successfully?</p> <p>Are teachers and LSAs involved in decision making – strategies, policies?</p> <p>Do they have the same level of input into these decisions?</p> <p>As a senior leader, how is the values and vision of the school shared and promoted?</p> <p>Are there comparisons / similarities in the roles of LSAs and teachers?</p>

## **Appendix 6: Initial draft questionnaire**

### **Questionnaire for learning support assistants**

Thank you for undertaking this survey which should take no more than 15 minutes to complete. The survey forms part of a study for the thesis in my Education Doctorate and is led by researcher Hayley Sae Kang from the University of Reading.

The aim of this project is to examine the experiences of Learning Support Assistants working in an English Special school.

The questionnaire is completely anonymous and you will not be asked for any details that will identify you. All data collected will be held in strict confidence and will only be used by myself for data analysis and subsequent publications.

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct.

If you have any questions about this research, before deciding to take part please email me at [H.SaeKang@pgr.reading.ac.uk](mailto:H.SaeKang@pgr.reading.ac.uk).

By completing this questionnaire, you are agreeing to your consent for your responses to be used for the purpose of research within the following study: A Case Study examining the experiences of Learning Support Assistants in an English Special school

In this questionnaire I am interested in learning about your thoughts and feelings towards professional identities, continued professional development opportunities and the school culture of the school you currently work.

1. How many years' experience have you got in your current role of learning support assistant in this special school (can be over more than one school)

Less than a year  1-2 years  3-5 years

Over 5 years

2. What "grade" are you?

Grade 1  Grade 2  Grade 3  HLTA

Please list your qualifications below: (GCSEs, A-Levels, NVQs, Higher Education, etc)

Professional Identity

In this section I'd like to learn more about your perception of what it means to be a professional and your feelings about being a professional.

3. How often do you consult with outside agencies in your role (e.g. health professionals, speech therapists)?

- Never
- Once a year
- Once or twice a term
- Once a week or more

4. What is the nature of these consultations? (e.g. meetings, therapy sessions, etc)

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5. How often do you participate in pupil assessment of P-Levels and / or National Curriculum levels?

- Never
- Once a year
- Once or twice a term
- Once a week or more

6. In what aspects do you participate in pupil assessment?

- Updating Individual Education Plans
- Commenting on topic based learning
- Setting targets

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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7. How often do you plan one to one or group activities for pupils?

- Never
- Once term
- Occasionally – a few sessions throughout the year
- Weekly – I regularly plan sessions for pupils

8. How often do you liaise with parents / carers about specific pupil progress?

- Never
- Once a year
- Once or twice a term
- Once a week or more

9. What is the nature of this interaction with parents / carers?

Written – e.g. reports, home school diaries

Verbal – e.g. parents' evenings, open afternoons

Verbal – e.g. telephone conversations, drop off / collection of pupil

Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

10. For the following qualities please state whether you agree or disagree that they define you as a professional

Quality	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree not disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Shared working ethic – working alongside the senior leadership team					
Ability to be flexible and adaptable					
Accept responsibility for your actions / decisions					
Use appropriate and correct language at all times (both verbally and written)					
Work reflectively, including accepting critical feedback					
Treat colleagues (in whatever capacity) with respect					
Undertake training which enables you to be successful in your role					

Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

11. Do you believe it is possible to separate personal relationships / life from your professional working relationships during your working day?

Yes

Mostly

At times

No

Other: (please state) \_\_\_\_\_

Any comments?:

12. Do you have any comments about any of your answers to the questions in this section?

Continued Professional Development

In this section I'd like to learn more about the professional development opportunities you have had within the school you currently work and the impact training has had on your ability to undertake your role successfully.

13. How much training have you received in your role?

- A great deal of training
- A moderate amount of training
- A little training
- I have not received any training for this role

14. Did you undergo initial training to enable you to successfully fulfil your role as a Learning Support Assistant in the classroom?

Training	Yes	No
Support in teaching for pupils		
(If yes, from whom? Senior management, class teacher, LSA, from a specific person whose role it is)		
Personal care – feeding, changing		
(If yes, from whom? Senior management, class teacher, LSA, from a specific person whose role it is)		
Behaviour management		
(If yes, from whom? Senior management, class teacher, LSA, from a specific person whose role it is)		
Play skills		
(If yes, from whom? Senior management, class teacher, LSA, from a specific person whose role it is)		
Alternative and Augmentative Communication (e.g. PECS, Makaton, eye gaze)		
(If yes, from whom? Senior management, class teacher, LSA, from a specific person whose role it is)		

15. What is the focus of training that you have had?

- Developing your skills to effectively support pupils in their learning
- Medical or personal care for pupils
- Behaviour management
- Development of play skills
- Communication with pupils
- Working as part of a team

Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

16. How useful has the training you have received been to your role?

- Extremely useful
- Quite useful
- Moderately useful
- Slightly useful
- Not at all useful

17. Can you explain how the training was useful (or not)?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

18. How often do you have opportunities to attend external courses outside of the school's programme of training for your personal professional development?

- Never
- Once a year
- Once or twice a term
- Once a week
- If I apply for it

19. What training would help you in your role?

Developing your skills to effectively support pupils in their learning

Medical or personal care for pupils

Behaviour management

Development of play skills

Communication with pupils

Working as part of a team

Other:

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20. Do you have any comments about any of your answers to the questions in this section?

Organisational Culture

In this section I'd like to learn more about your beliefs and feelings towards your position and place within the school you currently work

21. Are you kept up to date with changes in policies and procedures within the school?

- Yes
- Mostly
- At times
- No
- When it is relevant to my role

Any comments?:

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22. Are you given an opportunity to be involved in changes made to policies and procedures within the school?

- Yes
- Mostly
- At times
- No

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

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23. How enjoyable is your role?

- Extremely enjoyable
- Quite enjoyable
- Moderately enjoyable
- Slightly enjoyable
- Not at all enjoyable

24. Can you describe what makes your role enjoyable? Or not?

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25. How effective is the Senior Leadership Team in the following?

Key roles	Extremely effective	Very effective	Moderately effective	Slightly effective	No at all effective
Promoting a shared vision of the school ethos					
Acting as a role model – leading by example					
Managing the daily running of the school					
Ensuring high standards of competency and conduct within the school					
Supporting all staff in their professional development					
Taking responsibility for the monitoring of high quality teaching and learning in the school					
Implementing a school improvement plan in line with the school vision					

26. How valuable do you feel these aspects of your role are in supporting the teacher of the class?

	Very valuable	Somewhat valuable	Valuable	Not very valuable	Not valuable
Working closely with the teacher to make pupil assessments					
Working closely with the teacher to monitor and update behaviour plans					
Working closely with the teacher to monitor and update care plans					
Plan and carry out activities for specific pupils / groups of pupils					

Any comments?:

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27. How frequently are you made to feel valued by the classroom teacher?

Daily – as a team and individually

Weekly – during team meetings

End of half terms

Once or twice in a year

Any comments?:

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28. How does the teacher show their appreciation?

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29. How frequently are you made to feel valued by the senior leadership team?

Regularly – a member of the leadership team will praise me personally

Sometimes – during whole school meetings as a group, but not individually

End of half terms

Once or twice in a year

Any comments?:

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30. Do you have any comments about any of your answers to the questions in this section?

31. If you would be willing to be interviewed about your experiences as an LSA in an English special school please provide your contact information below.

Thank you for your time. Please return completed questionnaires to Hayley Sae Kang by *date*

## Consent form for interview

I have read the information sheet about the project.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Role: learning support assistant, teacher, senior leader (circle as appropriate)

Please tick as appropriate:

I consent to taking part in the interview

I understand I can withdraw at any point

I agree to the interview being recorded

I agree to the data I provide being used in publications

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 7: Example of coded transcripts

Codes and Themes:

Professional Identity	Organisational Culture	CPD
Professional integrity – PI Value and respect – VR Communication – C High Expectations - HE	Organisation – O Value and respect – VR Communication – C	Qualifications and experience – QE Training – T

<p>Teacher A: I'd say it's different, obviously there's age difference from when we trained and qualified. In education and how things move on is different. Different strategies that are popular at different time would be different.</p> <p>Um, I was able to do a lot of training as an NQT to develop my skills that were specific to special needs.</p> <p>Most of the training I have had has been in house training or learning on the job and some of that has come from senior management experience and knowledge.</p>	<p>age difference from when we trained and qualified.</p> <p>I was able to do a lot of training as an NQT to develop my skills that were specific to special needs</p> <p>training I have had has been in house training or learning on the job and some of that has come from senior management experience and knowledge.</p>	<p>QE</p> <p>T</p> <p>T</p>
<p>LSA B: right, the school team is a different thing because each class I feel we are not working as one unit. I feel we are working as individual units; individual teams</p>	<p>the school team is a different thing because each class I feel we are not working as one unit.</p>	<p>O</p>

<p>SLT A: Over time there has evolved a structure for LSAs that now exists – Lsa1; LSA2; LSA3 which gives them some career progression. In the past it was a right of passage that you would progress from a 1 to a 2 to a 3. However this has now changed and we expect them to be a bit more professional about it and we advertise posts and we interview for posts and we expect people to be able to produce quality presentation and quality interview and we have not given people position if they haven't fit the criteria. So for Lsas that structure has been brilliant.</p>	<p>Over time there has evolved a structure for LSAs that now exists</p> <p>Lsa1; LSA2; LSA3 which gives them some career progression. In the past it was a right of passage that you would progress from a 1 to a 2 to a 3</p> <p>them to be a bit more professional about it and</p> <p>we advertise posts and we interview for posts and we expect people to be able to produce quality presentation and quality interview and we have not given people position if they haven't fit the criteria. So for Lsas that structure has been brilliant.</p>	<p>O</p> <p>QE (and lack of in the past)</p> <p>PI</p> <p>HE (including when LSAs have not fit this expectation)</p>
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## Appendix 8: University Ethics Committee Approval

### IoE Ethics Committee:

Comments on application for approval by: Hayley Sae Kang

Tutor / Mentor: Cathy Tissot

Pertaining to: (please delete as appropriate) MA PGCap **Ed D** PhD Staff

Title of project: A Case Study examining the experiences of Learning Support Assistants in an English Special school

Date of submission:

Date of response:

Document	Submitted: Y/N/n.a	Approved: Y/N	Reason for rejection
Ethics form	Y	Y*	Including consent for interviews within the consent process for the questionnaires might lead to fewer responses for the questionnaire. There may be people who would happily complete the questionnaire but not the interview. Just a thought.
Info/Consent for participant	Y	Y*	Please consider the following points: - Is it true that this is a 'short questionnaire' that can be completed in 10 minutes? - the interview consent form should indicate that interviews will be recorded and give a rough indication of how long they should take
Info/Consent for parent/carer	n/a	-	
Info/Consent for HoD	n/a	-	
Info/Consent for teacher	n/a	-	
Risk assessment form	Y	Y	
Questionnaire(s)	Y	Y	
Interview / focus group schedule	Y	Y	
Data protection certificate	Y	Y	
Other comments to be considered before re-submission (to be share with applicant at tutor's discretion):			
<b>Date of re-submission:</b>			<b>Date of approval:</b> 4.12.15

## Appendix 9: Example of LSA Role Profile

### Role Requirements for a Grade 2 LSA

#### ROLE REQUIREMENTS

*This involves identifying the most significant responsibilities of the role. Accountability statements are key functions of the role which in combination make up the main purpose.*

Accountabilities	Accountability Statements	% of Time
Support for pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working with individual or groups of children, assist in ensuring pupils are kept on task and complete activities set by teachers</li> <li>Deal with behavioural and special needs issues in conjunction with the teacher</li> </ul>	25
Support for teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Help implement lesson plans</li> <li>Provide feedback to pupils without reference to the teacher</li> <li>Take small class or small group of pupils for defined activities e.g. reading, in the presence of a class teacher</li> </ul>	25
Support for curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contribute with teacher to lesson contents and aims</li> <li>Support and work with teacher in testing / assessment</li> </ul>	25
Support for the school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Carry specific specialist responsibility and support other staff in this area when needed</li> <li>In conjunction with teacher, liaise with parents on pupil progress</li> </ul>	20
Corporate and statutory initiatives - equalities/health and safety/e-government/sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain an awareness of school, national and statutory policies and requirements and apply these in the workplace</li> </ul>	5