Exploring student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards working with Learning Support Assistants

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Abstract
As a teacher educator specialising in special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in a large further education college in North-East England, a key concern of the student teachers is how to work with those other practitioners who provide support to learners in the classroom. A review of the literature, combined with my own experiences as both a teacher and teacher educator, led to three categories of inquiry: (i) students' understanding of how to work with learning support staff, (ii) students' experiences of and attitudes towards working with learning support staff and (iii) how well they believed they were prepared to work with learning support staff whilst studying for their teaching qualification. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with student teachers; these were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The research found participants felt a lack of guidance to work with Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), a lack of time to collaborate with LSAs, and variability in role expectations across different settings impacted on inclusive practice. This study raises pertinent questions about how to support student teachers to prepare for inclusive practice through collaborative working with LSAs. By examining the importance and complexities of the issues, teacher educators can explore ideas to prepare student teachers for collaborative working.

Keywords
Teacher Education; Learning Support Assistants; Inclusion; Collaboration.

Introduction
Within my context as a Teacher Educator specialising in special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in a large further education college in North-East England, I find a key concern of the student teachers is how to work with those other practitioners who provide support to learners in the classroom. A range of terms are used to describe the employees who provide support in the classroom, for example, Teaching Assistant, Learning Support Worker, and Learning Support Assistant. As the term 'Learning Support Assistant' (LSA) is often applied to those working with learners with special educational needs (SEN) (Martin and Alborz, 2014), for consistency, the term 'Learning Support Assistant' (LSA) will be used throughout this paper.

Mullholland and Connor (2016:1072) suggest collaboration between practitioners 'strengthens their capacity for inclusion'. Inclusion refers to an ideal that requires constant change to remove barriers, support diversity, and increase participation for all (Thomas and Vaughan, 2004). However, a lack of time for joint planning between the teacher and the LSA is highlighted as a key issue (Symes and Humphrey, 2011a) influencing inclusive practice. This often results in the LSA finding out about the intended learning outcomes at the same time as the learner. Modifications to resources are expected to be carried out then and there (Alston and Kilham, 2004). Without preparation time, the strategies become reactive rather than proactive, resulting in the supported learner having an increased dependency on the LSA (Symes and Humphrey, 2011b). Indeed, Webster *et al.* (2010:319) suggest the system of support for learners with SEN is 'highly questionable' and that support from an LSA can have a negative impact on the academic achievements of learners with SEND. This may be because the

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teacher gives less attention to the learner with SEN when they have an LSA to work one-to-one with the learner, resulting in the LSA providing the majority of the educational input. Symes and Humphrey (2011b) suggest that teachers often rely on the LSA to adapt resources and implement strategies to support learning, highlighting a lack of confidence from the teacher to work with learners with SEN. Giangreco (2003:53) emphasises the injustice of receiving primary instruction from an LSA stating 'most educators would consider these situations unacceptable for students without disabilities, yet these situations occur all too frequently for those with disabilities'. As beliefs and attitudes affect inclusion, I recognised that it is important to focus on this within my own teaching context. In addition to this, concerns around the utilisation of LSAs have often arisen during one-to-one tutorials when reflecting on teaching practice. A review of the literature, combined with my own experiences as both a teacher and teacher educator, led to three categories of inquiry: (i) students' understanding of how to work with LSAs, (ii) students' experiences of and attitudes towards working with LSAs and (iii) how well they believed they were prepared to work with LSAs whilst studying for their Post-Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in the post-compulsory education sector.

Method and framework

I recruited three participants from the PGCE and held semi-structured interviews that lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. This small sample does not claim to be representative of the PGCE students as a whole; it is a self-selective sample from a specialist group and as such is unlikely to reflect the views of the whole of the PGCE population. Self-selecting samples have been criticised for having no statistical validity, however, 'it is often used to allow students to express their views of a course' (Newby, 2010:254). This way of sampling may attract those who have a keen interest in the topic or have a story they wish to tell. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The study received ethical approval prior to commencing and adhered to protocols of ethical standards set out by the British Educational Research Association (2018). Data were then analysed using the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2018). Taking 'the social model of disability as a starting point' (Thomas and Vaughan, 2004:185) the Index for Inclusion is a 'values-explicit framework' (Higham and Booth, 2018:153) and a guide to school development led by inclusive values (Booth and Ainscow, 2016). 'The current edition revolves around two main concepts: (1) putting inclusive values into action, and (2) identifying and removing barriers to learning and participation through the mobilisation of resources' (Alborno and Gaad, 2014:234). The Index could be criticised for being too exhaustive for real-world application (Alborno and Gaad, 2014). However, using this index as a framework for categorising data according to three interconnected dimensions necessary to the development of inclusion, namely school and college cultures, policies, and practices, I was able to theme interview data. This will be discussed following an explanation of participant selection, ethical considerations, and reflections on data collection.

Participant selection and ethics

Obtaining ethical clearance from an ethics committee is salient for the protection of all involved in the research process (Bryman, 2012). In accordance with the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2018) it was necessary to ensure participants agreed to participate in the study of their own free will and were made aware they could withdraw from the project at any time. However, there are additional challenges of involving students in research when the researcher has a dual agency of educator and researcher. Ferguson *et al.* (2006:706) describe a fiduciary relationship of unequal power as 'the more powerful person ... entrusted to protect the best interests of the less powerful or dependent person' and suggest only recruiting your own students if 'no other students can meet the recruitment criteria'. I selected student participants from courses that I do not have direct responsibility for.

Diligence to protecting the dignity of the participants needs to be considered at each stage of the research process from recruitment to publishing the findings. Within my own project, I did not contact

the students directly as I did not want them to feel in any way coerced due to possible feelings of vulnerability arising from the thought that I may have some say in the decisions over their achievement on their programme. Ferguson *et al.* (2006:58) advises researchers who conduct research with their students to be aware of the status relationship between themselves and their students who may be 'considered captive'. Acknowledging this may have been an issue, to recruit my sample I asked other PGCE programme leaders in the department to send out an initial email to all of their final year PGCE students to invite them to participate in the project. On receipt of interest, I followed up with a face-to-face meeting to discuss further information about the project, including an information sheet, interview questions, and a consent form. It was explained in both the Plain Language Statement and at the start of the interviews that participation is entirely voluntary and would in no way impact their relationship with their tutor. I verbally checked the understanding of these considerations with each individual prior to the interviews commencing. All participants were made aware that the data collected would be pseudonymised and personal data destroyed in accordance with Data Protection legislation (2018). As Roulston (2010) suggests, I have sought to ensure transparency throughout the project. To support this, interviews were transcribed verbatim for trustworthiness and authenticity. However, I made the decision to remove fillers such as '*erm'* and '*you know'* when presenting the data unless specifically commenting on the importance of pauses as I felt this did not add anything to the data and may be perceived by the participant as negative representation of their voice (Dearnley, 2005). I have consciously deliberated over my own reactions to the research process and the way in which I have constructed knowledge, and this will be discussed throughout each of the following sections.

Data collection

This study was small-scale and involved three participants who shall be known as Sam, Charlie, and Kelly. Although I had not intentionally sought out students I had a prior relationship with, all three of the participants that volunteered were known to me as they had all undertaken an optional Supporting Learners with SEND module that I delivered. This, I surmise, could have both a positive and a negative impact on data collection. Positive in the sense that we already had a relationship so the rapport between us was already developed, albeit in a teacher/student relationship context, and negative in the way that power differentials may be more apparent. As Roulston (2010:99) suggests 'prior relationships with participants – while in some respects facilitating rapport – may also set boundaries on the kinds of topics that can be explored and represented'. Although difficult to ascertain to what effect, the prior relationship between the participants and me may have impacted how they wished to portray themselves and how much they censored their accounts (Mackenzie, 2011). However, on balance, I think an advantage of having a prior relationship with the participants helped in the amount of conversation that flowed as Karnieli-Miller *et al*. (2009:282) suggest 'the quantity and quality of the data shared with the researcher depend in part on the relationship that develops between the researcher and various participants'. Connelly and Peltzer (2016:53) suggest 'developing a rapport with the research participant prior to beginning the interview will enhance the elicitation of information necessary to provide the data for subsequent analysis'. Although I already developed relationships with the participants, it was still important to start the interview with some lead-in questions to create a relaxing atmosphere.

Data analysis

It is important to be open about how the data are analysed. Clarity around the process is necessary when considering dependability. In keeping with an interpretive paradigm, the inductive approach of thematic analysis as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2016) was used to review the data. 'Thematic analysis (TA) is a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data.... which seeks to understand what participants think, feel, and do' (Clarke and Braun, 2017:297). Braun and Clarke (2006) state TA is a flexible research tool that can support analysis of complex data and suggest five phases of analysis: 'familiarization with the data, generation of codes,

searching and reviewing of themes, defining and naming themes, and the production of a written account' (Bowles, 2017:503). Following these five phases, I started by listening to the audio recordings as I transcribed the data. Treasure *et al.* (2008) suggest researchers should read and re-read data to discover emerging themes to support understanding of the meaning of the data and several authors suggest transcribing your own data is an important way to develop familiarity and engagement with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Green *et al*., 2007; Newby, 2010). As I repeatedly listened to the interview, I was able to identify and generate codes for the second phase of data analysis. Clarke and Braun (2017:297) describe codes as 'the smallest units of analysis that capture interesting features of the data (potentially) relevant to the research question' and 'provide a framework for organizing and reporting the researcher's analytic observations'. Coding can be a difficult process for new researchers as this process is often not recorded when authors report their work (Newby, 2010). I began initial coding through colour coding to search for evidence of common themes. Anything that did not fit into a theme or pattern was filed under miscellaneous. This resulted in over-arching themes and sub-themes which were then linked to themes in the Index for Inclusion, namely cultures, policy, and practice. I found that although the process did take a great deal of time, the immersion in the data was beneficial in that I became very familiar with the data and was able to make links between what each participant said as I went along. Braun and Clarke (2006:87) suggest this phase is the 'bedrock for the rest of the analysis'. Having considered data collection and analysis, the following section will demonstrate how I utilised the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2018) as a framework to structure my findings. Themes will be presented below under the following headings: cultures, policies, and practices.

Findings

Cultures

Mullins (1999:31) states culture is a 'multifaceted concept' but may be described as 'a distinctive pattern of values and beliefs which are characteristic of a particular society or sub-group within that society'. Through their research looking at collaborative practice in primary schools in Wales, James *et al.* (2007:458) found that consistency and 'equal valuing and parity of esteem despite the team members' different roles and responsibilities' was a key indicator of successful practice. However, Charlie brought up the issue of a lack of respect between the teacher and the LSA. Commenting on an incident where she felt undermined by an LSA she stated they *'made it their point to correct me and at times I felt that that wasn't quite right to do that in front of the students'.* Experiences like this may contribute to the perception that managing LSAs within the classroom actually adds pressure to the teachers who may be 'less happy at the prospect of having another adult in the classroom' (Symes and Humphrey, 2011a:58). There may also be variability in role expectations across different settings increasing role ambiguity. Depending on the organisation LSAs may work as small group support or one-to-one with a particular learner. Support allocation within the classroom was an issue that all participants commented on. Charlie suggested that LSAs in her experience *'are happy to support all that's in the class ...which makes for a quite friendly, inclusive classroom'.* However, this contrasted with Sam's experience who claimed that support was allocated on a one-to-one basis but suggested this was not an effective deployment. This was due to the learner not wanting:

> anybody to help him because he can do it himself... so she'll just sit with her magazine for three hours on the day... there's no real need for her to be there. There's a lot more learners in the class that need support but they've just been left.... it's not good enough really.

Kelly *'realised how important it is to work with LSAs to support learners effectively'* but she also acknowledged how LSAs may stifle 'pupil independence' (Rubie-Davies *et al.,* 2010:444) as they may become a *'barrier for that learner to their classmates if the LSA is always with you and you don't have the time to talk to anybody else'.* Described as a 'velcro model' (Gerschel, 2005:71) this deployment

of LSAs has the potential to lead to a 'dependency culture' (Gerschel, 2005:71). Sam concurred with this notion, stating *'I don't think it should be just focusing on one person...because you're excluding them. Simply because the red light is on them because this person's around them constantly'.* This reflects Azad *et al.'s* (2015:343) findings that 'one-to-one assistants may have unintended negative consequences, such as interfering with peer interactions and developing unnecessary dependence'.

One unexpected theme that arose in the data was the issue of gender, and a degree of stereotyping with regards to women as LSAs, with two out of the three participants commenting on the lack of male LSAs and one referring to female LSAs as 'like mother figures'. Sam commented on the gender distribution of LSAs stating *'I have only seen one male LS member of staff here. And all the rest have been female, and it does impact, it does change, people react differently to men and they react differently to women'*. Charlie also made the point that some male students responded better to male support workers and said of one *learner 'he does get along quite well with male LSAs but I think there's less of them then there is women so he's restricted then cos there's not enough to go around'.* This reflects research undertaken by Blatchford *et al.* (2009) who explored the utilisation and characteristics of LSAs, the effect of the use of LSAs on learner outcomes, and the workload of teachers. In Blatchford *et al.'s* (2009:1) study 'most support staff were female'. Mackenzie's (2011:70) study also found amongst the LSAs 'SEN was seen as the preserve of women'. Indeed, classroom support was once described as 'Mum's army' (Gerschel, 2005:69) in reference to the unqualified support assistants viewed as damaging classroom standards.

Policies

Government policy highlights the requirement for inclusive education (DfE and DoH, 2015) and this has an impact on Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes as more learners with SEND are educated within mainstream provision. Da Fonte and Barton-Arwood (2017) stress the importance of preparing students for collaborative practice whilst studying for their teaching qualification and Rubie-Davies *et al. (*2010:444) highlight the importance of training teachers to 'direct and organise the work of support staff' that work in their classrooms. This requirement is highlighted in the Teacher Standards (2011) Part One, Section 8: 'deploy support staff effectively', although in the post-compulsory sector this standard is not so explicit. The Education and Training Foundation (ETF) (2014:5) state building 'positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues' as a key professional attribute. However, *Azad et al. (2015*) discuss the little to no training on how to supervise LSAs as part of teachers' preparation to teach. This corresponds to my own findings as all three of the participants highlighted the lack of guidance they had received to work with LSAs. For example, when asked 'did you receive any guidance about how to work with LSAs?' Kelly's response was *'No, I didn't'*, Charlie replied '*No, not particularly'* and Sam stated *'on the PGCE no-one tells you what you should do with learning support'.* As this was a closed question and required the use of prompts to elicit further information, I followed this up with 'What do you think would be useful for student teachers to support their knowledge of working with LSAs?'. This question produced considered answers, for example, Kelly thought this responsibility should lie with the mentor in placement stating *'when we start our placements, and we have induction sessions with the mentors, I think the mentor should ensure that they inform us about learning support'.* Sam considered the responsibility to be on the student teacher to *'do research and you need to fully understand somebody's condition; I think you need to observe as well',* highlighting the value of learning from others, and Charlie focused on the relational aspect of practice, suggesting *'it's important for a student teacher to get to know what the LSAs expect. Their expectations of the trainee teacher and the trainee teacher's expectations of them'.* This focus on collaborative practice is pertinent in the literature on inclusion and Webster *et al.* (2011:15) discuss how LSAs have become central to the inclusion agenda and emphasise the importance of 'support and guidance from the teacher and school about practice'. However, in practice, this may not always happen. One possible reason for this will be discussed next.

Practices

A key finding impacting collaborative practice is time. In their findings from the five-year Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS) Project, Webster *et al.* (2011:15) suggest that communication between the teacher and the LSA relied on the goodwill of the LSA arriving before school starts or staying behind after school finished in order to liaise with the teacher. They reported that 82% of LSAs worked extra hours on a voluntary basis. LSAs often go into lessons unaware of the lesson plan and without prior communication with the teacher. This impacts outcomes for learners and was a concern for the participants in my study. Sam suggested that LSAs *'should be involved in the planning ... they should be able to have some input.... but there's no communication'.* Charlie commented on information *'not disseminated between staff'* and said about communication with LSAs *'I don't really have anything to do with them outside of the classroom'.* If teaching is to be planned with all learners in mind, as stated in the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2018), it is necessary to allocate time for collaboration to support the learning and participation of all learners.

That learners, as well as staff, are able to work together collaboratively is another key indicator of inclusive practice (Booth and Ainscow, 2018). However, the practice of having a one-to-one LSA attached to a specific learner throughout the lesson was a concern. Kelly worried about the impact on relationships between learners when support was provided on a one-to-one basis and suggested *'instead of one-to-one support, I think maybe one LSA can help everybody in the class'.* Sam, who highlighted the LSA who sat at the back of the class as her allocated learner did not need support, agreed with this viewpoint. He commented on two different LSAs who *'come in and support the whole class, not just individuals. They will come in and speak to everybody, that's how I think it should be'.* This approach to support can enhance the learning and participation of all learners which is another important marker for evolving inclusive practice highlighted in the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2018). Charlie also commented positively on the way in which LSAs in her placement would support the whole class stating the LSAs *'have been more than willing to take on any of the learners that haven't had or are not allocated an LSA'.*

Implications for policy and practice

BERA (2014) suggest there is strong evidence that teacher educators should engage with enquiry-oriented research to fully explore and develop their practice. Through this research, I was able to get a better awareness of students' understanding of how to work with LSAs, students' experiences of and attitudes towards working with LSAs, and how well they believed they were prepared to work with LSAs whilst studying for their PGCE. From this small-scale study, it has become apparent that there is scope for improvement in supporting student teachers to work with LSAs. All three participants commented on the lack of guidance they received to work with LSAs whilst undertaking their PGCE. The deployment of LSAs makes a difference to the quality of education a learner receives. As observed by participants, interaction between peers can be reduced when learners are supported by an LSA. This is often because an LSA will sit next to the learner and take the role of their partner in paired activities rather than supporting communication between peers (Symes and Humphrey, 2012). To enhance practice, it would be useful to share the organisational policy on working with LSAs at the start of the programme to help the student teacher to understand the role more fully.

Supporting an understanding the role of the LSA also involves addressing gender stereotypes when they appear in discussion related to supporting teaching and learning. Through education the message that the LSA role is the domain of women can be challenged. This is important as the profession has gained a reputation of being a female oriented career choice and this might impact on the recruitment of males into what has been regarded as the field of women (Mackenzie, 2011). The conceptualisation of the role as gender specific is linked to stereotypical female attributes of caring and nurturing. This is suggestive of 'mothering' as highlighted by one of the participants and related

to Gerschel's (2005:69) idea of a 'Mum's army' when in actuality the position requires considerable pedagogical work.

Moran and Abbott (2002) suggest learning can be improved when teachers receive training on how to deploy support staff in the classroom. Although working with support staff is part of the theoretical content of the programme, the participants' comments suggest more support in teaching practice to develop skills in this area would be beneficial. Clearer collaboration from the start of the programme between teachers, placement mentors and student teachers around how and when student teachers will be guided on the deployment of LSAs would be one way to address the issue of feeling unprepared in this area of practice. As the student teachers in the post-compulsory sector teach in a range of contexts, this aspect of professional practice could be addressed through a meeting with the student teacher, the mentor, the LSA, and the teacher educator at the start of the programme. Setting out these expectations at the beginning would reduce the uncertainty around roles and encourage all involved to understand each other's responsibilities as collaboration is fundamental to supporting inclusive practice. However, Blatchford *et al.* (2009:2) found 'the majority of teachers did not have allocated planning, feedback or other allocated time with support staff they worked with in the classroom' and this finding was reflected in my study. LSAs may not be allocated space on their timetable to collaborate with teachers and the deployment of LSAs may not always be consistent. Ongoing training and joint planning time between the teacher and the LSA could better support the inclusion of all learners.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore student teachers' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards working with learning support assistants. Through this study, I was able to get a better awareness of students' understanding of how to work with LSAs, students' experiences of and attitudes towards working with LSAs, and how well they believed they were prepared to work with LSAs whilst studying for their PGCE. The implications for improving practice in this area have been suggested. A limitation of this study was that only semi-structured interviews have been employed. In future research, to triangulate the data, it would be beneficial to include other methods of data collection. Observation of practice and interviews with mentors, LSAs, and teacher educators on the PGCE programme could support a more comprehensive understanding of this topic.

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