Helping or Hindering: Understanding the Professional Development Needs of Learning Support Assistants in Post-Compulsory Education in England

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from a research project which developed and introduced the Enhanced Learning Support Assistant Programme (ELSAP). Untrained learning support assistants who were supporting students with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) in a College for Further Education in England were encouraged to enroll on ELSAP to enhance their professional development. The purpose of this paper is to share findings from the project and to report on some key professional developmental needs that college LSAs who worked in inclusive college classrooms have. Quantitative methodologies were employed and data were systematically collected over a fourteen-week period during ELSAP delivery and implementation. Findings indicate key gaps in the professional knowledge and practice of LSAs; misconceptions of their own role, responsibilities and tasks; unsatisfactory knowledge on SEND and appropriate interventions; limited understanding of physical symptoms on learning and little/no previous or existing knowledge and skills of the college curricula and unsatisfactory knowledge on how to motivate learners with SEND during the teaching-learning-process. Findings furthermore demonstrate that LSAs has a limited understanding of college policies/codes of conduct; lack knowledge on adult learning theories and lack professionalism in general.

Keywords

learning support assistants, learning support, special educational needs and disability, professional development, professional practice, inclusive education

1. Conceptualisation

As in the case with compulsory education in England and Wales, legislative reforms over the last three and a half decades brought a shift towards social inclusion and inclusive education for Children and Young People (CYP) with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) in post-compulsory education (Gibbs, 2005; Morgan, 2000; Oliver & Barnes, 2010; Tomlinson, 1996). Since April 1993, colleges for Further Education (FE) in England and Wales have particularly been employing Learning

Support Assistants (LSAs) to support CYP with SEND in inclusive classrooms (Bailey & Robson, 2004; Green & Milbourne, 1998). Mclachlan (2004, p. 3) described the essence of having college LSAs in classrooms to deliver support as, "their role and responsibility go beyond being just an extra pair of hands. They become part of the teaching team who observe, assess, teach, supervise and support".

Since the 1990s authors claim that LSAs in FE colleges should be trained to understand their role and deliver specific tasks ranging from pastoral care to "specialist" (SENET, 2005; Sutherland, 1997; McLachlan & Davies, 2013) tasks. Hoban (2002) argues that professional development for teachers of teaching (and by implication for LSAs who work as part of the teaching team), is to facilitate professional learning as a process of learning and development for educational change (Hoban, 2002). Skills for Business (2006) defined the role of college LSAs by developing professional standards for LSAs who work in colleges in 2006. This was followed in 2007 by the outline of a pen portrait on personal and professional characteristics for college LSAs, by Lifelong Learning United Kingdom (LLUK) who are the sector skills body for colleges (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007). Despite efforts, a mandatory and relevant training framework for college LSAs still does not exist (McLachlan 2012; Mclachlan & Davies, 2013; McLachlan, 2014).

2. The Research Process

Within the context of this absence of a satisfactory training framework for the professional development of college LSAs, an Enhanced Learning Support Assistant Programme (ELSAP) was developed by the author in one such college for FE in the East of England. Nine LSA's volunteered to participate on ELSAP over a fourteen-week period to enhance their professional knowledge and skills (Cohen et al., 2011; Fox, 2000; McLachlan, 2012). Qualitative data were collected over the research period, between October 2006 and March 2007, in a total of 28, ninety-minute sessions, for interpretation from the reflective diaries of the nine LSA participants; thirty-minute classroom observations of LSAs practice and; research field notes (Coffey, 1999; Cohen et al., 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Robson, 2002; Mertens, 2005; Spradley, 2008; Stevens & Cooper, 2009). From critical engagement with data themes derived, indicated that untrained LSA's has profound professional development needs and that these needs has to be addressed for them to efficiently and appropriately support the learning process of CYP with SEND in inclusive college classrooms.

The first theme shows how LSAs have: misconceptions of their own role, responsibilities and tasks; unsatisfactory knowledge on SEND and appropriate interventions; limited understanding of physical symptoms on learning and little/no previous or existing knowledge and skills of the college curricula and unsatisfactory knowledge on how to motivate learners with SEND during the teaching-learning-process; a limited understanding of college policies/codes of conduct; a lack knowledge on adult learning theories and lacked professionalism in general.

LSAs gave permission for data to be analysed for interpretation and publication. All names were

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changed for ethical purposes. Permission to conduct the research was also obtained from the vice-principal of the College where the research was carried out and from the University ethics committee. Analytical induction was used to identify themes and subjects while conceptual analysis supported decisions about the level of analysis, the amount of themes to be coded or as a code for the existence of the frequency of a theme (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004; Cohen et al., 2011).

3. Thematic Analysis and Discussion of the Data

The educational philosophy of equality of opportunity has had challenging implications for its implementation within college settings (in the same way that it has had for other educational settings such as schools and universities) (Allan, 2010; Barton, 2010b; Benjamin, 2002; Jones, 2003; McLachlan, 2014; Norwich, 2008; Rogers, 2007; Slee, 2010). However, unlike the occurrence in schools, LSAs in colleges emerged almost unnoticed (Bailey & Robson, 2004), and their roles and duties vary from supporting small groups of learners who are clustered together on the basis of their learning needs to one-to-one individual support for learners identified as having SEND (Morgan, 2000). For LSAs to be effective in these roles, they need to have a good underpinning knowledge and understanding on aspects such as: the teaching-learning process; the learning needs of post-sixteen learners and particularly those with SEND; the health and safety needs of learners and their safeguarding; educational policy development and reform and how these influence everyday non-discriminative and inclusive classroom practice (Armitage et al., 2003; Bailey & Robson, 2004; Bruce et al., 2010; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Robson & Bailey, 2008; Skills for Business, 2006).

Themes emerged upon analysis of qualitative data. The first theme strongly indicates that LSAs had very little knowledge and understanding of their role, duties and tasks on how to support college students in inclusive classrooms.

3.1 Misconception of Own Role, Responsibilities and Tasks

From reading, Anne's narration below we can see how she has increased her knowledge-base; she used words e.g., "feedback" and "plan", which were both key teaching-related vocabulary. She also mentioned herself that she "learnt", and then explained what she has learnt.

I did not realize that I observe students for a specific reason. Working in the class and being amongst students almost appears informal and natural. I learnt to be much more observant of specific things (like students behaviour). When I discuss students now with the tutor, I focus on what I need to report on for my job is to give feedback, did students complete their task, and did their behavior affect how they completed the task. Tutors take my feedback into account when they plan their next lesson (Anne). Another LSAs' narrative reads along similar lines, "communicating with students is part of what I do. I never really give it that much thought" (Moira). The difference between these two narratives is that in the first instance, the LSA realised that observations are very important and for a good reason. Almost two decades ago, data from a research brief conducted by Farrell, Balshaw and Polat (1999, no page number) for the Department For Education and Employment (DFEE), indicated that "LSAs' value

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training which had direct practical application". In my professional experience as a lecturer for LSAs supporting disability education, the same is true today. I reflected in my field notes the following:

During a professional discussion with one of my LSAs today, I realised the importance of flagging up specific aspects of their performances during these discussions. What may seem like an informal generic chat to the class teacher may be experienced as valuable constructive feedback for the LSA and an opportunity to learn about important detail of his/her performance. Professional discussions, formal or informal are valuable training opportunities (Field notes).

The second narrative above shows a lack of understanding as to the importance of effective communication. The absence of explanation around the subject highlights this lack. Effective communication is key to our role in classrooms (Curzon, 2004; Giangreco & Doyle, 2007; Minton, 2005). Theories of communication involve the art of active listening, verbal use of language and how non-verbal language should support verbal speaking. Giangreco and Doyle (2007) summed up that this theory is needed for instructional dialogue. Communication with the learners is also much different to communication with the tutor as part of the teaching team (Fox, 2000). Reasons for and barriers in communication need to be understood. Knowledge on how to support learners with receptive or expressive communication impairments is vitally important (Snyman & Engelbrecht, 1996).

According to Snyman and Engelbrecht (1996), receptive communication impairments refers to, for example, learners who are speakers of other languages who struggle to comprehend what has been said, or learners with cognitive impairments who subsequently also have comprehension difficulties. Learners with expressive communication impairments may also be second or third language users or it could be due to a physical difficulty such as stuttering. LSAs would need very specific training in all of the above cases to fulfil their role and tasks in inclusive classrooms effectively (Bailey & Robson, 2004; Fox, 2000). Other issues to do with communication as part of the LSA role include, for example, issues on data protection and confidentiality, and the issue of power relations. Peters (2010) conducted an interesting study to explore disabled student's voices. He discusses how knowledge on power relations in "inclusive" classrooms can support student's developing much needed resilience and identity. It is, therefore, essential that the broad area of communication is included in programmes for the professional learning and development of LSAs which is why it is a component of Unit 03 of ELSAP (McLachlan, 2012).

The first extract above indicates a positive change in classroom practice. Although we may need to make assumptions about the second extract as to whether educational change has occurred, we can conclude that as a key responsibility of the LSA role, "effective communication" has hitherto been hugely under-explained. This absence of explanation indicates a significant lack of LSAs' knowledge on "effective communication" as well as significant misconceptions about its importance in the teaching (supporting)-learning-process. The next theme continues by describing a lack in LSAs' knowledge base as it emerged from data which, in this case, is a lack of understanding in specific regard to teaching or supporting learners with LDD and how to access the curriculum for those

learners.

3.2 Unsatisfactory Knowledge on SEND and Appropriate Interventions

Supporting post-sixteen learners with, for example, social, emotional and behavioural difficulties can be challenging (Ayers, Clarke, & Murray, 1999; Fox, 2000; McSherry, 2001; Rogers, 1998). It is almost as if by now they should have grown out of the attention-seeking behavioural stage, which is more age-appropriate to younger children than young adults, but this is often not the case Rogers（2000, 2001). There are various reasons for people to behave in a certain way and in college we often "inherit" young people who dropped out of secondary education and who, for some reason or other, failed to achieve. This in itself is grounds on their part for defensive behaviour (Rogers, 1998). LSAs in college support these post-sixteen learners with behavioural difficulties and need to employ a sound knowledge of the reason for these behaviours, and how to support these learners by using positive behaviour management strategies (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Farrell, 2000; Hallowell & Ratey, 1994). An LSA who supports a learner with ADHD reflects in her diary:

Worked with Steven today. He has a very short attention span and loses interest in his work easily. He is not good at writing stuff and today he had to construct a paragraph or two towards his assignment and I just couldn't help him to achieve that. I struggled to get through to him. He can be very fidgety and once he starts to be restless, the situation usually gets worse. Today was no exception and he ended up being sent out of the room. He got annoyed with himself and started to kick off and when a fellow student offered to help, he actually swore at him. I feel sorry for Steven he is not a bad lad (Rose).

Rogers (1998), explains that behavioural interventions draw on the effective use of language on the part of educationalist to correct behaviour. According to Rogers (1998), knowledge on other aspects such as non-verbal language, timing, tactics, diversions, distractions, to name a few, are all vital to re-directing challenging behaviour. Also see Hill and Parsons (2000) with specific reference to "effective communication" asa key elementin the forming of team strategies for managing behaviour. This is yet another instance where research highlights the importance for LSAs working with young people to be adequately trained if they are to acquire the necessary knowledge on behaviour management. Another extract from a LSA's reflective diary also relates to supporting a post-sixteen learner's behaviour. However, the origin of the behaviour is somewhat different than in the previous narrative. In this case the learner has been identified with moderate to severe autism, which triggered unpredictable and sudden outbursts. This further theorises the importance for LSAs to be subjected to practice related training. Below follows the self-explanatory narrative of Wilma who worked in the Painting and Decorating Department of the college supporting Chris (who is autistic) and his challenging outbursts:

Today Chris my 1:1 finished stripping of his wall. He usually needs lots of direction and support for he gets bored easily and he also works better in a quieter area. He suffers from severe autism and the slightest change in his programme, noise levels, his own frustrations or boredom, can trigger sudden and rather aggressive outbursts. I trust my instincts when I work with Chris. I do not have any training for autism and although I have worked out a lot of things for myself, it would have been good to

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discuss Chris's issues with someone who can give me specific advice on how to manage his behaviour even better (Wilma).

Although the LSA does not describe a specific incident or how she dealt with it, she does show some insight and knowledge about Chris and his difficulties and admits that she could have benefitted from relevant training on autism to be more effective in her role. In this case, the narrative describes the lack of proper and adequate training with regard to a LSA supporting a learner with SEND.

In both these cases the behavioural interventions are very specific. The use of language (verbal & non-verbal) and communication play an important role in positive behaviour management (McSherry, 2001; Rogers, 1998; Rogers, 2001). Further to this, interventions such as the break-down of the physical day by using a linear time-table, and consistency and predictability of the environment play a vital role in the teaching-learning-process for someone who presents with autism. A calm, quiet work area is also important as sensory overstimulation can induce outbursts (Fox, 2000; Snyman & Engelbrecht, 1996).

From both these examples from LSAs' diaries we can conclude that there existed a lack of practice-specific knowledge about how to support post-sixteen learners with SEND. Although we do not have evidence of how the lack of knowledge affected the work of the two LSAs involved, it is rational to think that it would have had a somewhat less than desirable impact on their classroom practice and for the post-sixteen learners involved. The next theme also deals with learners with SEND and how LSAs' lack of knowledge on symptoms of physical conditions/impairments, effects of pain and medication on learners with physical conditions, affects LSAs' practice and subsequently the learning of learners with SEND.

3.3 Limited Understanding of Physical Symptoms on Learning

From experience learners with moderate, severe or profound physical disabilities (Farrell et al., 2007; SENET, 2005) can at times suffer from pain or the effects of medication taken to ease the pain. Anne reflected in her diary: I support Entry students on Friday afternoons. Although I circulate amongst the group and support whoever needs my help, I mostly support a male student who is wheelchair bound because of his Cerebral Palsy. He is severely physically disabled and has very little use and movement of his arms and legs. He becomes tired very easily. My role in supporting him is to transcribe his thoughts which are often a guessing game because of his severe communication impairment. Although he usually enjoys being part of a social group and getting attention, it is obvious that he suffers pain in the afternoon for he begins to make loud noises. I wish I knew what caused his condition and how I can make life easier for him. He has a wicked sense of humour and is an important member of the class (Anne).

Working with young people with a physical disability (often complex needs) can be very tough both professionally and at a personal level. To witness someone in pain and not be able to do anything about the situation can be emotionally very draining and stressful for the LSA involved. Parallels for coping as educators of learners with SEND can be drawn from the key report by Tomlinson on "inclusive

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education" in 1996, and current practice. According to Tomlinson (1996), for those learners with disability or learning difficulty who were initially permitted to access mainstream education, the starting-point was usually the description of their condition (diagnosis) given by doctors. Tomlinson (1996, p. 5) continued to explain about SEND and strategies for teachers: Each student must learn the ways needed to proceed in the chosen study and adjust their learning styles accordingly. The task of teachers is always to affect a marriage between the requirements of particular subject matter and the predispositions, stage of development and the capabilities of those who would learn…we extend this view to the learning strategies adopted by people with disabilities and/or learning difficulties and their teachers.

From Tomlinson (1996) the message was very clear, although the implication of "inclusive" education for those with SEND may be challenging, teaching staff need to adapt to ways to cope, taking conditions and special requirements into account. Professional learning for LSAs who work in similar situations as the above LSA (Anne) would benefit hugely from opportunities to explore the special needs of the learners that they support with this type of ailment. They ought to be able to research the area of need, find definitions for and the potential causes of the physical condition, and bring these to the table for discussion with other LSAs and more senior staff. Tomlinson (1996, p. 8) suggested in his ground-breaking report (McLachlan, 2012), that "staff training" will support cooperative, interdisciplinary team support which is needed to enhance knowledge about learner support for SEND in inclusive settings.

Almost two decades later, the above reflects my own professional experience and confirms my current views that professional development interventions on how to physically support a learner who is, for example, on the severity level of the spectrum of physical needs are required. This would include: how to know when to administer pain medication and to make allowances for the influence of medication on the learner; ways to access the curriculum and to develop skills around making good judgements on when to do which type of activities/tasks. An extract from my field notes illustrates my experience and supports my views: Andrew, is a learner on MENCAPs' Essential Skills programme who seem to benefit from the social aspect of being at college. He has a co-morbidity of physical and sensory needs. He's hard of hearing and refuses to wear his hearing aid most of the times. This results in him often not understanding what is expected of him and becoming frustrated. In addition to this, Andrew also has physical needs due to a rare syndrome, which mean that his muscles, particularly the muscles in his limbs, can go into sudden spasms which can be very painful. He has to take medication daily which we administer in the afternoons. Accessing the mainstream curriculum for Andrew is a daily challenge for me and the LSAs who support him. With no fault on Andrew's part he is either in a state of drowsiness because of his medication or being intolerant with himself because of his poor hearing and lack of comprehension. He also has a very short attention span and can have a mood swing when he is in physical pain (Field notes).

This narrative shows the diversity of knowledge, skills, initiative and stamina Andrew's team must

have to support him in college. LSAs who worked alongside me of whom some attended ELSAP, benefited from having professional development opportunities during which they discussed their professional and personal needs of when it came to supporting Andrew and others in similar situations in inclusive classrooms. We must assume that the physical, sensory, emotionally and cognitive needs of learners must be an integral part of the mandatory training for the supporters of learners with complex needs. Support in this area means support within a specialism (Sutherland, 1997; Woolfson & Trussel, 2005). Referring back to the above narrative by Anne, she expresses her need to increase her knowledge on Cerebral Palsy, the condition which she supports and she thereby "admits" to having a gap in her knowledge.

Further analytical engagement with data from the diaries of LSAs shows that, to a lesser extent, gaps in knowledge on specific special needs existed. Claire wrote in her diary: Today, there was only one student who I was required to support, it was the student with the sensory impairment. She has both hearing and visual difficulties which often left her feeling confused during classes. She sometimes suffers headaches and has to take medication which makes her feel spaced-out. Because she is enrolled on a GCSE course which required consistent hard work on her part, it is important that she does not fall behind on assignments. It is my task to ensure that she stays on track and that her physical condition does not become too much of a hindrance in her progression. This is not always an easy task for like today she has shown signs of tiredness. It is the end of the week and the three-hour lesson was just simply too long for her. Although she has worked on her own and alongside me for the majority of the time, she may have benefited from going home earlier, getting some rest and to continue with assignment work at a later stage when she felt up for it. Sometimes we just expect too much of our learners with disabilities in the name of inclusion. I think that there is a definite physical limit as to what learners with disabilities can take and do within one college day. Not being disrespectful, but this is just how I feel (Claire).

This is a candid insider's reflection on the experience and role of an LSA who supports a learner with physical impairments in mainstream college education (Becker, 1998). Although the LSA demonstrates with this narrative an awful lot of insight, there is some room for improvement. Although the three-hour lesson appeared to be too lengthy for this specific learner who presents with both hearing and visual impairments, there are ways in which the LSA could have broken down the time and the learning/writing assignment into more manageable chunks.

An adequately trained LSA would have negotiated a different learning frame with the tutor/lecturer for this student which allowed the student to take short breaks to revive her levels of concentration (Rogers & Horrocks, 2010). The narrative did not explain the resources used or the modification of learning materials and we cannot make a judgment on the quality of the learning support in this respect. However, there being no mention of this may indicate the "absence" thereof (resources and modification of learning materials), which may indeed highlight an urgent need for training on specialist ICT equipment, enlargement of documents and specialist auditory equipment.

A further aspect of the above extract is that is shows signs of mild emotional burnout on behalf of the LSAs which, in my view, may impact on her professional judgement and practice (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). LSAs need to be trained on how to deal with the emotional component of their work. They need to stay mentally healthy in order to perform effectively in their support roles as an element of personal involvement is always inevitable when a person delivers this kind of "caring" work (Robson & Bailey, 2008). It is important that LSAs form forums or learning communities which offer them opportunities to discuss their work (and difficult situations) within a safe and secure environment (Wald & Castleberry, 2000). Reflection will help them to ventilate feelings of powerlessness and sadness for some of the severely disabled students that they so often have to support (McGill & Brockbank, 2006; Schön, 1987). The following theme shows how inadequate knowledge about the curriculum area impacts on LSAs' practice during learning support.

3.4 Little/No Previous or Existing Knowledge and Skills of the College Curricula

In order to make sense of the uniqueness and range of vocational programmes, we need to learn and adopt specific skills, for example, to support the practical tasks in Engineering or Painting and Decorating. In this section, short extracts from written tutorials and reflective diaries highlight the lack of curriculum-related knowledge and understanding on the part of LSAs. It is logical to assume that, as a result of this, learning support will be compromised. An extract from a written tutorial reads: "I am new to being a LSA in college and this is the first time that I work within the area of Painting and Decorating" (Kelly). Another extract from a written tutorial states along the same lines, "Although I have worked as an occupational therapist before, I am new to my LSA role in the college, and I am new to working in early years" (Mary). Another LSA reflects in her diary, "although I have worked in a nursery before I am new to working on entry level courses" (Rose).

Upon critical engagement with data a theme, pointing towards a lack of understanding and knowledge for the vocational areas within which these LSAs work, arose. The vocational curriculum is very different from the school curriculum and vocational studies also differ hugely from each other. Each area falls at a specific level within the wider QCF (Dimbleby & Cooke, 2001) and will have specific entry requirements, curriculum and curriculum outcomes. In order to be effective as a teacher in these vocational areas, very specific vocational knowledge and skills are required and the same is true for the LSAs who work alongside these tutors in classrooms and workshops.

3.5 Unsatisfactory Knowledge on How to Motivate Learners during Teaching-Learning-Process

Motivation is an educational psychological science (McCown et al., 1996). According to McCown et al. (1996) motivation involves a sound knowledge of the theoretical aspects of the educational psychological aspects of motivation, for example, the different forms of motivation, and the intrinsic as well as extrinsic factors which influence the motivation of learners and barriers to that motivation. For LSAs, motivation has to do with how they communicate and how they use their own verbal language, facial gestures, tone of voice, etc. It is also about showing an understanding of how you communicate with learners and the impact it may have on their motivation (Curzon, 2004; Fox, 2000; Giangreco &

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Doyle, 2007; Hill & Parsons, 2000; Minton, 2005).

Motivation can take on many forms, for example, showing an interest, answering questions, praising and encouragement. Data indicates a lack of LSAs' knowledge on the science or underpinning theory of motivation. The following examples from LSAs' reflective diaries show how they failed to use opportunities for motivating their learners. I think it is logical to conclude that this happened due to a lack of knowledge of the science of motivation rather than interpreting this as chance. Rose made the following entry in her diary: I have made a point of being more professional. I seem to not getting on with a particular student that I work with and don't think I support him enough. I often struggle to communicate with him or get through to him. I want my relationship to be better with this student-he needs a lot more encouragement from me. I want to be professional and model effective communication and am currently undertaking reflective practice to improve my work (Rose).

Although Rose shows a lot of insight into the cause of her dilemma, she needs to consolidate a good working relationship with the student she works with through building his trust and respect. Being professional and the way in which she communicates is going to be vital to achieving this. She shows an understanding of these aspects and has tried to improve by reflecting upon it. In the same diary entry she wrote, "reflective practice has been particularly beneficial to me, I have made a point to talk to other LSAs about this particular student that I have difficulties to work with and I have tried to take advice from them". This is in line with the benefits of reflection on practice (McGill & Brockbank, 2006; Stevens & Cooper, 2009; Schön, 1987).

Moreover, Rose continues to write, "the student seemed not to respond to my gestures of communication and encouragement and instead appeared not to have heard my remarks". There could be various reasons why this has happened, but we cannot speculate on these. Analysis indicates that there is a real effort from the LSA to become more professional in how she communicates. She shows some understanding of her own professional limitations and wants to better herself. If adequate LSA training is provided, she will continue to learn and improve her communication skills (Farrell et al., 1999; Robson & Bailey, 2008) and begin to better understand the methods used for building and establishing interpersonal working relationships to improve her interaction with and the responsiveness of a student. As soon as that has happened, she will be able to discuss his reasons doing his course and figure out what motivates him (McCown, 1996). Is he participating in this course to please his parents (external motivation) or is he doing it to become employable and independent (internal motivation)? Once the LSA finds answers to these questions, she will become more confident about how to motivate this student. Further analysis provides a logical explanation as to how this situation of inefficiently trained LSAs can be resolved. This particular LSA had and took the opportunity to engage in effective and relevant training through her participation in ELSAP and others with similar training needs should be given the same opportunity. A second narrative reads:

I have worked in a nursery before and found it much easier to praise and encourage children compared to the young adults who I now support. One has to be so careful with young people they pick up more

easily if you don't mean what you say. It is also much harder to show a real interest in what they do if they are not easy to chat to. How can I encourage them if I don't know what they've done or what they were supposed to do? …Perhaps I am just not cut out for working with college students (Mary).

Another confessional and rather candid narrative (Becker, 1998) reflecting the self-doubt of the LSA. Her way of writing and rhetorical questioning are clearly indicative of how little she knew about motivation as part of effective communication when working with post-sixteen learners. Again, adequate training would provide the theoretical knowledge on effective communication and how to motivate and she desperately needs this to do her work effectively. Training would also provide her with the emotional empowerment and inner strength she deserves and needs to have as an LSA of post-sixteen learners (Skills for Business, 2006). Domain A of the National Occupational Standards for LSAs working in FE refers to the personal attributes these individuals must have or develop (Skills for Business, 2006; McLachlan, 2012). We can again assume that the LSAs' practice would have been affected by her lack of knowledge on how to motivate the college learners that she worked with. The next theme explores how a lack of knowledge and understanding about college policies impacts on the quality of the learning support.

3.6 Limited Understanding of College Policies/Codes of Conduct

College policies provide a framework for practice (Barton, 2010; Benjamin, 2002; Dyson & Slee, 2001; Rogers, 2007; Slee, 2010) for all members of staff, including LSAs. For example, policies on behaviour, data practice, health and safety, teaching and learning, safeguarding children CYP, accident and emergency, ICT and more. Engagement with data showed that on a number of occasions LSAs were oblivious to the existence of these policies, let alone their key aspects or how they would influence their practice (Bailey & Robson, 2004). I quote an extract from a classroom observation completed just before the LSA commenced with ELSAP:

Gemma had to deal with an incident which occurred during a practical lesson in Engineering where a student got slightly injured. Although she was very caring and supportive to the student, she failed to write up and log the incident on the required paperwork (Classroom observation).

If Gemma had knowledge on the accidents and emergencies procedures as outlined in the college policy for accident and emergencies she would have completed the correct paperwork.

A different situation occurred but also relates to a lack of knowledge on college policy with regard to confidentiality. Below is the extract from Kelly's reflective diary: I got told off by my class tutor today, for I mentioned an incident which occurred in the classroom a few weeks ago to another adult who used to work at the college and it got back to my class tutor. According to him such information is always confidential and I may have breached the students' right to confidentiality with regards to the college policy on Data Protection (Kelly).

The above extracts further highlight the need for relevant professional learning and development for college LSAs who work as part of the teaching team in inclusive classrooms (Tomlinson, 1996). Although nothing serious has happened to the LSAs involved in these incidents, this may have very

well resulted in formal disciplinary action against them or even dismissal should a learner have been disadvantaged due to their unprofessional actions. A further theme which emerged from data analysis heightens the lack of knowledge and understanding LSAs had on how adults learn.

3.7 Lack of Knowledge on Adult Learning Theories

A lack of knowledge on the adult learning theories which underpin our approach to teaching and support had a significant impact on LSA practice. When teaching, and by implication supporting, we base our approach to teaching on various factors, including, theoretical knowledge of the different learning theories (Curzon, 2004; Sutherland, 1997). The development of adult learning theories from Pavlov and Skinner's work, to more modern explanations and approaches of how adults learn which includes the work of Mezirow, Bandura, Maslow and Vygotsky show how these different views have shaped our practice in adult education over the last sixty plus years (Daniels, 2009; Getzel & Wehman, 2005; Jarvis et al., 2003; Mezirow, 2000).

Qualitative data generated from classroom observations and my insider's field notes, illustrates that untrained LSAs in colleges do not necessarily ground their practice in classrooms upon a knowledge of andragogy (the science of teaching adults), and that often, therefore, they do not understand why they have to deliver practice in a certain way. The following is an extract from a classroom observation, around the time that Gemma commenced with ELSAP.

Gemma has been working with me for almost a couple of months, since beginning of September. She is new to her role and I told her today the best way to learn how to do her job is to copy me. This is a good a strategy for direct contact and implementation of instructions and most tasks. Gemma helped me to organise the tables and lay-out the materials. She copied me and went around from table to table, listening and prompting discussion amongst the learners. From Gemma's body language, I, however, doubt if she fully understood the rationale behind social learning (Classroom observation).

The above extract refers to Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which is based on the view that people learn far better from their peers and within a social context (Jarvis et al., 2003). An extract from my field notes reads that more LSAs will benefit from professional development opportunities to explore theories of learning: I had a brief conversation in the corridor with an LSA today who asked me why I thought her tutor allows his students to work in groups of four and with their friends. She felt annoyed by the fact that the classroom is always noisy and that learners were always talking (Field notes).

Social learning implies that there will always be a buzz in the classroom. It indicates discussion, debating, analysing and learning (Jarvis et al., 2003). How tutors (and LSAs) manage the groups and facilitate the group work and feedback is very important to the overall success of employing social learning. Both extracts above, highlight the lack in LSAs' knowledge-base on this aspect of learning. Appropriate training should address these teaching needs of LSAs. Although these examples from data do not explicitly tell us if this lack of knowledge impacted on their practice as LSAs, it indicates that they may never be capable of being in a position where they have to facilitate and manage social

learning by themselves.

Although knowledge in this area would probably enhance LSAs' use of certain strategies in the classroom we do not have evidence to support this statement so it remains speculative for the purposes of this thesis. The last theme which emerged demonstrates LSAs overall lack of knowledge on professional etiquette.

3.8 General Lack of Professionalism

LSAs play a vitally important role in the success of post-sixteen learners, especially those with SEND (Bailey & Robson, 2004; Robson & Bailey, 2008; Tomlinson, 1996). For the benefit of these learners it is important that LSAs access information, provide feedback, report on situations that have occurred, and liaise with others in order to best serve the interests of their learners. However, there is a definite boundary to the role of LSAs, a ceiling to what they can and cannot do (Fox, 2000). From experience, I know that LSAs are often put in positions where they have to take the lead or make decisions outside their remit. This contravenes the boundaries within which they are supposed to operate. There is always good justification for this, however, this puts LSAs in a vulnerable position, especially when they suddenly have to cover for someone who is ill and they need to access information to do so. Nevertheless, as part of their role, LSAs first port of call is always their class tutors or lecturers (Fox, 2000). It is not professional to contact managers or outside course leaders without the "consent" of their tutors and lecturers. This would be seen as undermining the authority of their immediate collaborators.

As theorised earlier in this chapter, these aspects of a "line of communication" need to be explained and discussed with LSAs as part of their personal and professional development (Curzon, 2004; Farrell, 2001; Minton, 2005). I made various field notes over a prolonged period of time in which I reflect on the lack of knowledge of LSAs in relation to lines of communication. A few extracts follow as examples of gaps in LSAs' knowledge as to whom they should report to. "Moira has just pushed passed a line of people waiting at a curriculum manager's door. Apparently she had to clarify an issue"; and "I overheard Claire questioning the curriculum head of Engineering in a corridor"; as well as, "Received an email from the vice-principal today, saying that she supports Wilma to do a course in Asperger Syndrome. When did Wilma speak to the VP?"

Professionalism always impacts on class room practice. Unprofessional behaviour of this type may not impact directly on LSAs' classroom practice, but it will leave a stain on their practice. Whether it is peoples "backs they've got up or peoples" toes they've stepped on, they will be sanctioned one way or the other, and this will affect their practice. My aim with ELSAP was for LSAs to become empowered and for their professional profile to be raised through professional development and for them to develop a professional voice (McLachlan, 2012; Skills for Business, 2006). Data indicated that there was room for improvement and because these incidents occurred when LSAs had already started to participate on personal and professional training, data provided me with an opportunity to bring these pitfalls to the table for discussion. My approach and intervention were in accordance with McNally

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(2009 p. 942), who argued the following: It is important for teachers to be provided with opportunities to undertake reflective, collaborative, classroom-focussed inquiry in order to develop a well-informed approach to their own learning journey or trajectory. Approaches to initial teacher education and continuing professional development across the UK should aim to support teachers in this way.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The title "helping or hindering" of this paper indicates that not all is what it seems and that the "helping" is often at variance with what actually happens, "hindering?", or to what should happen. In this research qualitative data were generated from using inductive exploration using methods such as, LSAs' own reflective diaries, classroom observations and my own field notes. Themes which emerged from a critical engagement with data were untrained LSA's: misconception about their own role, responsibilities and tasks; unsatisfactory knowledge on SEND and appropriate interventions; unsatisfactory understanding of how physical symptoms, pain and medication effect learners and their learning; little/no previous or existing knowledge and skills of the college curricula; unsatisfactory knowledge on how to motivate learners during the teaching-learning-process; little/no understanding of college policies/codes of conduct; lack of knowledge on adult learning theories; and a general lack of professionalism.

These themes have all been discussed and evidence from the data shows that LSAs working in inclusive colleges in England has professional development needs which need addressing if the performance of LSAs is to improve. Serious gaps in the knowledge, understanding and skill of LSAs exist and data demonstrate that training programmes such as ELSAP are vital to not only overcoming LSAs' lack of knowledge, understanding and skill, but to their self-esteem and the confidence with which they conduct their practice. Critically, the data highlights the need for appropriate and relevant personal and professional development training for college LSAs to bring about educational change to inclusive classroom practice for the benefit of post-sixteen learners with SEND (Hoban, 2000; Von Bertalanffy, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

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