Workplace learning for Learning Support Assistants
in a special school

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Abstract

Abstract of thesis submitted by Trudi Martin for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, University of Manchester
Thesis titled: Workplace learning for Learning Support Assistants in a special school

This research explored the factors that influence whether Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), who support the learning of pupils with very complex learning needs, are equipped with the necessary skills to help these students learn. A significant feature in the delivery of educational support to pupils with low incidence needs is that it is LSAs who provide the majority of educational instruction and, furthermore, these paraeducators work with only limited supervision from class teachers. It therefore follows that if high quality educational assistance is to be available to pupils, then those undertaking the majority of this support need to have appropriate pedagogical knowledge. I explored this complex subject by undertaking a workplace ethnography at a single special school over the course of an academic year. In my ethnography, I used a number of data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews with teachers, LSAs and therapists, as well as participant and non-participant observations.

The limited literature on the topic of LSA learning concludes that they are not being provided with the learning opportunities they need for the demanding work they do. However, because of the scarcity of information in the literature pertaining to the development of this important group of the educational workforce, I needed to look to the literature on organisational learning more broadly to inform my work and relate it to my own area of interest. The lack of priority given to non-formal learning was a key theme across these texts, with opportunities for participative learning emerging as an important feature. However, this aspect alone could not explain the reasons why these paraeducators did not have access to learning provision appropriate to their needs and so I looked to other theories of workplace learning.

The conceptual and analytical approach of the Working as Learning Framework (WALF) (Felstead, et al., 2009), with its incorporation of the concepts of systems of production, discretion, and learning environments and territories, offered me the opportunity to scrutinise the situation regarding the learning and development of LSAs from a wide perspective.

Through my adoption of the WALF I have identified the influences that shaped the workplace learning environment of the LSAs at the special school. In doing so, I have added to the limited research on this important and yet inadequately understood group. Although my study focused on one special school this research can inform how the abilities of paraeducators in different educational settings can be developed, because of my adoption of the WALF’s theoretical standpoint. Furthermore, by applying the WALF, my thesis has utilised workplace learning theory to make an important intellectual contribution to the discussion about how high quality educational provision can be delivered. My thesis is also apposite, because the number of children with more complex learning difficulties is increasing and these individuals require specialist paraeducators to be appropriately equipped to meet their needs, whether they are being educated in special or mainstream schools.
Declaration

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And last, but by no means least. Chris, you now have your wife back! Oliver and Tom, I count myself incredibly lucky to have you as my sons and I am very proud of you.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Michael

Michael is adorable. I can now see it. People say it frequently and yet until now I didn’t see it.

All I saw was feeling afraid of my own son. I am no longer afraid I am proud of the young man he is growing into.

The situation at home before Willowbank School was dire. John and I were so scared of changing the routines Michael had adopted and placed on us that we just carried on becoming more and more tired and down.

Michael, in turn, was not happy at Lister School. He was not being stimulated enough and they were unable to use the communication aids to help him. Michael in turn then came home frustrated and bored and with no pride in himself and he took that out on me in the form of aggression...

Home is now a much happier place and when I sat down on Sunday night after dropping Michael back at Willowbank School I realised my love for him had come back. It has of course always been there but it was buried under the years and years of struggle.

The placement at Willowbank School works and it’s given me back my son. He now strides with purpose, pride and belief in himself and he feels secure and happy.

I am so proud of my son and instead of seeing the autism..... I see him

Email from Michael’s mother to Willowbank School staff, September 2015
1.1 Introduction and research rationale

In her account of his educational progress Michael’s mother illustrates the difference that knowledgeable and competent educators make to the lives of children and young people with very complex learning difficulties (sometimes described as ‘low incidence learning needs’). Furthermore, her words highlight how the pedagogy and practice of educators extends beyond pupils to directly affect the lives of their families. In a nutshell, Michael’s mother powerfully and articulately conveys why this research matters.

In the recent major reform of Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) legislation, under the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010 – 2015), the Department for Education (DfE) stated:

*Everyone who works with disabled children and children with SEN should have high expectations of them and the skills to help them to learn*

(DfE, 2012, page 11, my emphasis)

A key feature in the provision of education in special schools is the use of teaching assistants, known as Learning Support Assistants, to provide the majority of support to pupils; furthermore, these paraeducators work with only limited supervision from their class teachers. It therefore follows that if appropriate educational assistance is to be available to pupils in special school settings, then those undertaking the majority of this support - the Learning Support Assistants - must have relevant specialist pedagogical and subject knowledge.

My thesis explores the factors that influence the extent to which those who support the education of pupils with very complex learning difficulties are equipped to undertake this role, with a focus on a special school setting. The provision of such highly specialised educational support relies on seamless co-ordination and communication by all those involved in its delivery and is an area that has received very little attention in the literature.
However, the extent to which the appropriate specialised provision is available is dependent on a multitude of factors. Whilst some of these are within the control of those working in the special school itself, there are also important aspects that are driven by external considerations, such as local authority mandates and the English Government’s Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) policy. Therefore, in order to fully understand the issues that shape the provision of educational support for pupils with low incidence learning needs, this research needed to examine the pressures from within and outside the organisation.

And so, bearing all of these considerations in mind, I pose the following research question:

**What factors influence whether Learning Support Assistants are equipped to provide specialised educational support to pupils with complex learning difficulties?**

In order to address this question, I chose to study a single case, Willowbank special school, and adopted an ethnographic approach to gather my data. I also used the Working as Learning Framework (WALF) (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson and Unwin, 2009) as an analytical tool because of its three central constructs. The first was in the WALF’s use of the ‘Systems of Production’ model from economic theory, which helped in the identification of Willowbank’s stakeholders and in the assessment of the effects of their demands on the educational provision at the school. The second of the WALF’s constructs encouraged an examination of the part the affordance and exercise of ‘discretion’ played in workplace learning; the third aspect was how these considerations (and any other factors that emerged) shaped the organisation’s approach to workforce development when contemplated in relation to Fuller and Unwin’s (2004a) ‘expansive-restrictive’ continuum.

Whilst this thesis focuses on the delivery of education in a special school environment, it has the potential to inform the education sector more widely. For example, there are a considerable number of pupils with significant learning difficulties educated in inclusive educational settings and this has caused significant challenges for the mainstream teaching assistants who are charged with their support. Furthermore, research indicates that this group of educators feel ill-equipped to meet
the needs of these students, but that their concerns go largely unaddressed. It is also worth noting that demographic data concludes that the number of individuals with complex learning disabilities is increasing due to medical advances, which means that special and mainstream schools will need to have sufficient numbers of classroom support staff who are appropriately trained to work with students who require this more specialised educational tuition.

1.2 Very complex learning needs

At the outset, I need to supply some descriptions to provide insight into the difficulties that confront pupils with very complex learning needs. These descriptions also help the reader to comprehend the breadth of knowledge that teachers and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), who work in these specialised educational settings, require. In this dissertation, I use the overarching term ‘very complex learning needs’ to capture the challenges faced by students with low incidence learning disabilities, such as Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD) and Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD).

Mansell (2010) noted that:

[Individuals with PMLD] have severely limited understanding. In addition, they may have multiple disabilities, which can include impairments of vision, hearing and movement as well as other challenges such as epilepsy and autism

(Mansell, 2010, page 3)
[Individuals with SLD] *often use basic words and gestures to communicate their needs. Many need a high level of support with everyday activities... Some people have additional medical needs and some need support with mobility issues*

(British Institute of Learning Difficulties, no date)

Imray and Hinchcliffe (2014) and Lacey (2001), amongst others, remark that pupils with such complex learning difficulties require an individualised curriculum that addresses a pupil’s specific learning disabilities and where learning is constructed around a ‘process-based’ or functional learning model, in which the educator is “*facilitator rather than didact*” (Imray and Hinchcliffe, 2014, page 45). This necessitates that educators have a flexible pedagogic approach, along with an understanding of the techniques that facilitate communication and skill development. When considering the individual curriculum described by Imray and Hinchcliffe (2014), it is important to note that in special schools it is common practice for LSAs to work one-to-one with a pupil to deliver their specialised education plans (Azad, Locke, Downey, Xie and Mandell, 2015) and, significantly, LSAs work without supervision from a teacher for the greater part of the school day.

LSAs who support pupils with complex learning difficulties must also deal with challenging behaviour, which is usually the result of the frustration felt by pupils as an outcome of their substantial problems with communication. Between 10% and 15% of individuals with complex learning difficulties, and up to 30% of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), resort to challenging behaviour (Stoesz, Shooshtari, Montgomery, Martin, Heinrichs and Douglas, 2014). Challenging behaviour includes physical and verbal aggression, self-harm and hyperactivity and it is not difficult to understand the stress felt by the staff and pupils involved, particularly when they occur on a frequent basis (Hastings, 2005; Leyin and Wakerly, 2007). Managing such incidents is resource intensive, not only to ensure the safety of pupils and staff at the time, but also to handle the aftermath appropriately. Consequently, dealing with frequent behavioural incidents requires agile staff management if pupil learning is not to be adversely affected (Kelly, Carey, McCarthy and Coyle, 2007).
1.3 Rise in prevalence of very complex leaning needs

An important contextual point is that the number of people in the UK with learning disabilities is rising. Contributory factors to this increase are the growing number of very premature babies who now survive into adulthood, and the expansion in the proportion of English adults who belong to South Asian ethnic communities (data indicates a two-to-threefold increase of the prevalence of more severe learning difficulties in children and young adults from these groups) (Emerson and Hatton, 2008). A report by Parrott, Wolstenholme and Tilley (2008) illustrates the scale of the increase in a large English city. These researchers analysed data from the Sheffield Case Register to determine future needs for social, health and disability services. They observed that between 1998 and 2008 the number of children and young people with learning disabilities in the city rose by 120%, and over this same period the number of teenagers with severe or complex learning disabilities increased by 70% (data for younger children with complex learning disabilities was not included in their analysis). In chapter two, I discuss the significant rise in the teaching assistant workforce in England and examine the reasons for this and given the data from Emerson and Hatton (2008) and Parrott et al., (2008), it would be reasonable to assume that this upward trend in paraeducator employment is likely to persist.

My work is one contribution in this under-researched area and if the educational needs of pupils with complex learning difficulties are to be met now and in the future, it is clear that more attention must be given to the thousands of classroom support staff who are charged with providing the majority of this educational support.

1.4 The structure of this dissertation

1.4.1 Background

In the next chapter I describe the background to my research, for example the substantial rise in classroom support staff following the Labour government’s ‘Workforce Remodelling’ legislation (in 2003), which was introduced in an attempt to recruit and retain teachers. Consequently, a number of administrative tasks were
removed from teachers and they were allocated non-contact time to undertake planning, preparation and assessment activities (PPA). This led to the significant rise in the employment of classroom support staff and with it a blurring of the delineation between the responsibilities of teachers and paraeducators. A second contributory factor that led to the increase in the paraeducator workforce was the more inclusive educational philosophy of the Labour government in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act in 2001. This legislation strengthened the entitlement of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities to attend mainstream schools, and it is teaching assistants who support these students in mainstream classrooms. Moreover, in the current fiscally restricted climate the savings that schools are able to make, by employing support staff to undertake tasks of an increasingly pedagogical nature cannot be overlooked. I go on to compare the role of ‘Learning Support Assistants’ who work in special schools and that of ‘Teaching Assistants’ (TA) who provide support in mainstream environments, and consider the important differences between these two classroom support roles. When I reviewed the literature on the different types of training available to these two groups of paraeducators and examined the relevance of the learning opportunities, it quickly became apparent that there is very limited research on this subject.

Given the expectations placed on LSAs to provide individualised sessions without the constant presence of a teacher, the relationship between these two educators is of fundamental importance. I spend time contemplating the demands on the teaching staff who work in this highly specialised educational environment, and evaluate how teachers’ responsibilities influence the access their classroom staff have to on-the-job supervision. I also consider the role school leaders have in facilitating learning opportunities for LSAs, as well as the degree to which they enable teachers to manage their class teams effectively, since these senior leaders have a vital role to play in shaping the calibre of support for pupils.

I also evaluate the existing SEND landscape by examining the governmental policies that relate to the education of pupils with complex learning difficulties and I scrutinise the expectations placed on educators by other important stakeholders, such as local authorities. A highly significant change to SEND legislation, The Children and Families Act (The Stationery Office, 2014), came into force during the period of
my research and those involved in implementing the subsequent changes continue to
navigate their way through this wide-ranging law. Furthermore, in the current
economic climate, when radical financial decisions made by the Treasury are
reverberating through society, the consequences of the ‘austerity’ budget on
education, disability and health services are apparent throughout chapter two.

In the latter half of chapter two I review the literature on organisational learning,
including writings on formal, informal and non-formal approaches to employee
learning and I make clear my use of these different definitions in relation to my
research. I also contemplate the potential relevance of the Community of Practice
literature (Wenger, 1998) to my study. I bring chapter two to a close by reflecting on
the utility of the WALF (Felstead, et al., 2009) as a way of helping to frame my
analysis, with the framework’s three interlinked concepts of the ‘systems of
production’, ‘discretion’ and the ‘expansive – restrictive’ continuum (Fuller and
Unwin, 2004a) of organisational approaches to workforce development.

1.4.2 Methodology

My research question was the central consideration in determining my
methodological approach. In chapter three, I explain my choice of a case study
design and why I chose to undertake my research using a single case, that is,
Willowbank special school. I gathered my data by means of a workplace
ethnography, within my case study setting, and as a result my findings are based on a
range of research activities, including participative and non-participative
observations, semi-structured interviews, researcher-led training and reviewing
organisational documentation. My fieldwork at the school took place over the course
of one academic year, and for the latter six months of that year I undertook data
collection two days per week, every week, during term time. Owing to the amount of
time I spent at Willowbank school, I gathered an extensive amount of information
and I go on to explain how I analysed the wealth of data I had accumulated. Due to
the breadth of my material, I could provide comprehensive insights into the
workplace learning environment for the LSAs at the school, as well as illuminating
the internal and external influences that shaped this provision. This, in turn, affected
the educational support these paraeducators could provide to their pupils.
Chapter three also considers the implications of the multiple roles I have had at Willowbank, as until two years prior to my doctoral research I had been a volunteer at Willowbank and when I ceased my volunteering activities I was asked to become a school Governor, a role I have to the present day. Furthermore, during my research I was asked by the Headteacher and Deputy Head if I would be prepared to help with teacher training and undertake meeting facilitation, following the introduction of a new organisational performance management process and to help teachers to develop more effective management skills. I agreed to these requests and was permitted to include data from these activities in my research findings. I spend time in chapter three discussing in what way my various roles within the organisation were both an advantage and disadvantage during the course of my research.

1.4.3 Willowbank School: A productive system

Chapter four serves two purposes. The first is to provide background information about Willowbank in order to contextualise my research. I begin the chapter with a vignette about the activities at the end of a day at Willowbank, with the aim of bringing my research setting to life, because the working environment for educators at the special school is markedly different from that in the majority of English educational settings. The vignette also illustrates the myriad of pressures on the school system, some of which are present in mainstream schools, but many of which are unique to a special school environment.

Secondly, it is in this chapter where I start to discuss my findings on the way work is organised at Willowbank, and how this affects the learning environment at the school and the type of training provision available for the LSAs. As the chapter progresses my consideration of the WALF begins to take shape, including how the school and its hierarchical structures map onto this analytical framework.
1.4.4 Staffing levels and workplace learning

Chapter five begins with a vignette about a teacher, Michelle, and her class team of LSAs and examines the substantial staffing issues that permeate the daily management of activities at the school. Whilst the chapter begins with a description of the start of the day for Michelle, the vignette might routinely apply to any of the eleven teachers at the school. At the heart of this chapter are the findings that relate to the constant lack of LSAs, either because of sickness absence or resignations, and how the teachers and class teams cope with insufficient numbers of appropriately trained staff. I discuss the implications for LSA learning in light of these staff shortages and the resultant stress that the novice LSAs, in particular, feel because they are expected to work with students before they have gained sufficient understanding and knowledge of what is required. I conclude this chapter by reflecting on my findings, which despite illustrating the stresses and strains of working in such a challenging setting, also show that many of the LSAs would not leave Willowbank for employment in less demanding workplaces because of the intrinsic rewards of the work they do.

1.4.5 LSA learning and development

Chapter six begins with a vignette about an experienced LSA called Hattie and her student, Mary, and illustrates the expectations placed on the paraeducators at Willowbank. In the vignette, I show the breadth and depth of knowledge this group of staff need to provide an appropriate level of educational support to their students. I go on to talk about the challenges of the work the LSAs perform and how the organisation strives to equip them with the knowledge and skills they require. I contemplate the extent to which the learning and development provision at the school actually meets the needs of the LSAs. As the chapter progresses it becomes clear that there are numerous organisational constraints, influenced by internal and external pressures, which limit the learning opportunities LSAs have, for non-formal training in particular, despite the expansive intentions of the Headteacher and Deputy Head. I examine the various learning groups that are encouraged at the school and reflect on whether these could be viewed as Communities of Practice.
(Wenger, 1998), as well as considering the part played by the LSAs themselves in making the most of the learning opportunities on offer.

1.4.6 Roles and responsibilities

Chapter seven opens with a vignette about the training I delivered to teachers, at the request of the Headteacher and Deputy Head, to help them to understand the principles of line management, following the advent of their newly acquired responsibilities as line managers to their LSAs. This chapter then goes on to examine a number of aspects about the management culture at Willowbank. Firstly, I appraise the role of the teacher as line manager and how they approached the organisation and management of their class team of LSAs. I also consider the numerous demands on the teachers’ time and the extent to which the Willowbank teachers were able to focus on monitoring the classroom practice of their staff, and the scope they had to work with their paraeducators to help them in their development of knowledge and skills.

I go on to explore how a new performance management system was implemented by the Headteacher, Deputy Head and teachers at Willowbank and the consequences for the LSAs at the school. This performance management initiative was launched by the Human Resources department across the whole of Cedars Trust, of which the school was a part. I draw on findings from the training I provided to teachers, and additionally examine the findings from a meeting I facilitated with the Headteacher, Deputy Head and senior teachers where they defined and documented the specific roles and responsibilities of the LSAs and teachers. Furthermore, I used information from a teachers’ meeting I observed, when the principles of the new organisational performance management process were set out by the Human Resources Director.

In this way, chapter seven also looks at the influence of the overarching organisation, Cedars Trust, on Willowbank and how corporate initiatives affected the working lives of staff at the school and shaped their workplace learning environment. In addition, I make reference to the utility of the WALF in helping me to identify and examine the wider influences within Willowbank’s productive system.
1.4.7 Discussion and Conclusion

Although I discuss how my findings relate to my research question throughout this thesis, I bring them together in chapter eight, my discussion chapter. I contend that the provision of learning and development opportunities for LSAs at Willowbank was affected by numerous demands, which came from within and outside the organisation. In my discussion chapter I draw on, and evaluate, the Working as Learning Framework (WALF) (Felstead, et al, 2009) as a means of helping me to make sense of my extensive research findings and in answering my research question. For example, mapping the WALF’s concept of ‘productive systems’ onto my study helped me to identify and assess the impact of various internal and external stakeholders on workforce development at the school, and how this affected the LSAs’ confidence in their delivery of educational support to pupils at Willowbank. In addition, ‘discretion’ emerged as a multi-layered and complex construct at the school with inconsistent approaches to the affordance and exercise of autonomy and trust. Organisational artefacts also played an important role in determining the extent of discretion that LSAs were afforded, and had a bearing on how they could develop their classroom practice. The final aspect of the WALF, captured in Fuller and Unwin’s (2004a) ‘Expansive-Restrictive Approaches to Workforce Development’ model, was highly constructive in helping me to contemplate the learning and development outcomes for the LSAs at Willowbank. As a result, I revealed the paradoxical nature of the organisation’s support for LSA learning at the school and with particular reference to formal and non-formal approaches.

My research also illuminated other aspects of the working environment at Willowbank, which had a significant impact on LSA learning and I go on to discuss these in chapter eight. I return to them in chapter nine, my conclusion chapter, when I highlight the key points from my research, and which draws this thesis to its close. In chapter nine, I also discuss my intellectual contribution to the subject of workplace learning theory and my contribution to policy and practice in relation to the development of LSAs, and specialist teaching assistants in mainstream settings, who work with pupils with very complex learning difficulties. Given the paucity of literature on the subject, this research will be a valuable addition to the understanding of this complex area.
CHAPTER TWO

Background and literature

2.1 Introduction

The debate surrounding the rise in teaching assistant employment, along with the ensuing debate as to their preparedness for the educational roles they have been assigned (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, et al., 2011), has centred almost entirely on mainstream settings and the contribution of these classroom support staff on the academic attainment of pupils (Webster and Blatchford, 2015). The term ‘Teaching Assistant’ (TA) is the one most commonly used and ordinarily refers to staff working in mainstream schools in a role that covers a wide range of classroom responsibilities. As Watson, Bayliss and Pratchett comment:

*Historically, teaching and learning support staff in English schools have worked in a variety of often idiosyncratic ways contributing a variety of support such as for reading and literacy support, specialist teaching support (technology, science, IT, etc.), and there are a large number of ESL (English as a second language) support staff in inner city schools*

(2013, page 100 – 101)

There has been considerably less attention paid to the work and pedagogical responsibilities of teaching assistants who work with pupils with more complex learning disabilities (Keating and O’Connor, 2012) and whose educational support varies markedly from that in mainstream classrooms (Alborz, Pearson, Farrell and Howes, 2009). These educators are often known as Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) and this is the term I use in this dissertation when I am referring to this group
of staff. LSAs work for considerable periods of time without supervision and, in many cases, in isolated learning spaces. The limited literature highlights the scarcity of appropriate training for this specialist role (Runswick-Cole, 2008; Symes and Humphrey, 2011) and given that the government has cut funding opportunities aimed at their learning and development (DfE, 2015a; Edmond and Hayler, 2013), one must question the priority afforded this important group of employees, despite the messages conveyed by the government; for example, the quote noted previously:

*Everyone who works with disabled children and children with SEN should have high expectations of them and the skills to help them to learn*

(DfE, 2012, page 11)

With the continuing increase in the number of individuals with complex learning disabilities entering education (Emerson and Hatton, 2008; Parrott, Wolstenholme and Tilley, 2008), it follows that the need for LSAs will continue to rise. Without meaningful research to inform this important area we are failing this vital group in the educational workforce and, as importantly, the pupils they support.

### 2.2 Reviewing existing literature

I searched the literature accessing electronic databases via the University of Manchester Library (for example the Applied Social Science Index, the British Education Index, Educational Resources Index, Sociological Abstracts and ProQuest). I was familiar with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) journals used by the SEND academic community (such as the British Journal of Special Education, the British Journal of Learning Disabilities, the European Journal of Special Needs Education, the Journal of Intellectual Disability Research) and reviewed articles within these journals as a starting point, expanding my reading to additional journals and other sources of relevant material as appropriate. I also reviewed the articles in the wider educational literature (such as the Cambridge Journal of Education, the Journal of Education for Teaching, and Management in Education). As with the SEND literature I expanded my reading through articles cited in these journals, including those published via open access (for example, Education Policy Analysis Archives). As it became clear that there was limited
literature on my area of interest, and what was published on LSA and teaching assistant learning was narrowly focused, I realised it was essential to broaden my reading and familiarise myself with the organisational learning literature that explored different workplace contexts and considered various theoretical approaches (for example, in Human Resource Management, the Journal of Health Organization and Management, the Journal of Workplace Learning, and Work, Employment and Society). I was diligent in searching the literature using a consistent set of terms, since the nomenclature used to describe ‘classroom support assistants’ was not limited to one job title (for example, Teaching Assistant, Learning Support Assistant, Paraeducator, Classroom Assistant).

I also read organisational literature on line relating to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (for example, the British Institute of Learning Disabilities, the National Autistic Society, the National Association of Special Educational Needs and Sense) and Government and Department for Education information and publications on line. My reading extended to books, on-line information from organisations such as the Institute for Professional Development and newspapers. My supervisor and co-supervisor were also a source of advice as to appropriate reading and by the time I embarked on my fieldwork I had read widely across different academic disciplines and considered workplace learning across numerous organisational contexts.

2.3 Increase in classroom support staff

To understand the context of this research some historical background is needed. The number of classroom support staff (by which I mean both teaching assistants and learning support assistants) has significantly increased over the past decade, an expansion set in motion by the Labour Government’s ‘Workforce Remodelling’ legislation in 2003 (Ofsted, 2004). Workforce remodelling was introduced to address the problem of insufficient numbers of graduates entering, and remaining in, the teaching profession; a situation that endures in both mainstream and special school settings today (Parker, 2015; House of Commons Education Committee, 2017). Excessive teacher workload was cited as a key factor in teachers’ decisions to leave the profession and, in an attempt to address this, a remodelling strategy was put in place by the then Labour government (Bedford, Jackson, and Wilson, 2008;
Hammersley-Fletcher, 2008; Stevenson, 2007). As a result, twenty-four administrative tasks were removed from teachers (for example photocopying, putting up classroom displays, ordering equipment) (Carter and Stevenson, 2012) and they could no longer be asked to invigilate examinations. Further changes included a limit in the amount of time teachers could cover for absent colleagues, and they were allocated ten per cent non-contact time to enable them to undertake planning, preparation and assessment activities (PPA). To fill the resource gap left by the removal of such tasks from teachers, plus the gap in resource that arose because of the introduction of PPA time, there was a concomitant rise in the number of classroom support staff employed in British schools. This increase in employment was accompanied by an expansion in the type of work they carried out, especially the ‘Higher Level Teaching Assistant’ (HLTA) role that was introduced in 2003 (Hancock, Hall, Cable and Eyres, 2010). The HLTA position incorporated a significant pedagogical component, including covering classes during teacher absences. In the intervening years, TAs and LSAs of all grades, in mainstream and special school classes have taken on teaching responsibilities, which were previously the domain of a qualified teacher (Stevenson, 2007).

When the scale of the expansion in TA employment is scrutinised, the government’s figures for the number of TAs employed in the mainstream state funded sector are illuminating. In 2000, there were 79,000 full time equivalent (FTE) TAs in local authority schools and by November 2015 this had increased to 263,000 FTE TAs in English local authority maintained and state funded academies and free schools (Statistical First Release, June 2016), (DfE, 2016b). In 2015, the number of LSAs working in local authority maintained special schools and state funded special academies was 34,000 FTE, a five per cent increase on the previous year (DfE, Statistical First Release June 2016), (DfE, 2016b). This figure does not include LSAs employed in non-maintained special schools and numbers for these organisations are not centrally available. However, given that eighty-seven non-maintained special schools were members of the voluntary organisation the National Association of Specialist Schools (http://www.nasschools.org.uk) in January 2016, it is reasonable to assume that the number of LSAs employed by these organisations will add substantially to the available data.
Following workforce remodelling in the education sector, and subsequent increase in the use of classroom support staff, there has been a perceptible blurring of the delineation between their role and that of the class teacher (The Guardian, 10th February 2017). This lack of clarity is evident in both mainstream and special school settings and requires scrutiny. The educational literature makes a distinction between the teacher as the professional pedagogue and the classroom support assistant as the ‘paraprofessional’ (Cameron, 2014; Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, et al., 2011), where a paraprofessional is defined as:

*A person to whom a particular aspect of a professional task is delegated, but who is not licensed to practise as a fully qualified professional*  

(Oxford English Dictionary on-line)

Although of some help this characterisation of a paraprofessional is too simplistic and for the school employees who navigate this role - be they teachers, TAs or LSAs - the devil is very much in the detail. In fact, it is not only the education sector that has had to wrestle with a lack of precision between the responsibilities and expectations of those occupying professional and paraprofessional roles. This same debate has been ongoing in the National Health Service (NHS) for some time in relation to the tasks undertaken by health care assistants and registered nurses on hospital wards, and paramedics in the ambulance service (Kessler, Heron and Dopson, 2015; McCann, Granter, Hyde and Hassard, 2013; Spilsbury, Adamson, Atkin, Bloor, et al., 2011).

Given that the boundaries between the responsibilities of teachers and “paraeducators” (Tillery, Werts, Roark and Harris, 2003) are becoming increasingly indistinct (Harris and Aprile, 2015), and that they “are making pedagogic decisions although their levels of subject knowledge may not prepare them to do this effectively” (Hancock, Hall, Cable and Eyres, 2010, page 99), it is worth reflecting on the contradictions between the occupational requirements of teachers working in special schools and those of their LSA colleagues. In contrast to the lack of attention given to the learning and development of LSAs who work with pupils with low incidence learning disabilities, there has been increasing government awareness that teachers who support the education of this group of pupils require specialised skills and knowledge (Brown, Stephenson and Carter, 2014; National College for Teaching
and Leadership, 2014; Norwich and Nash, 2011). Teachers are required to complete a postgraduate qualification in multisensory impairment (MSI), hearing impairment (HI) or visual impairment (VI), although there is no central government funding for this additional qualification, which takes at least two years to complete. Some non-maintained schools accept a qualification in autism instead of the Department for Education (National College for Teaching and Leadership, 2014) stipulated mandatory qualifications, because pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) make up a significant number of students at special schools (as is also the case in mainstream schools that support pupils with special educational needs). In contrast to teachers, LSAs in special - and mainstream - schools can be employed without any relevant qualifications or specialist knowledge, and any scope for their learning and development is left to the discretion of their employing school (Graves, 2014).

Another factor that cannot be ignored in these fiscally restricted times is the way in which budgetary considerations play a part in school managers’ staffing decisions, since the pay, career structure and deployment of TAs and LSAs in England are determined at a local level (be that the local authority, a state-funded academy, or a state-funded free school) (Graves, 2014). Whilst the literature discusses the ethical considerations of the “exploitation of the cheap labour provided by teaching assistants” (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2008), a quote by an assistant Headteacher in Carter and Stevenson’s (2012) research, highlights the reality in schools across the country, “You know the economics are very, very difficult to argue against whatever my beliefs are about the quality of the workforce” (page 489).

A point made by Tillery, Werts, Roark and Harris (2003) may have been made about TAs (paraeducators) in the US over a decade ago, but the observation remains highly relevant in the UK today:
Paraeducators are one of the most cost efficient components of special education because they provide additional classroom help, while typically earning one-third to one-half of the amount earned by classroom teachers

(Tillery, et al., 2003, page 118)

A second contributory factor that led to the rise in the number of TAs employed by mainstream schools was a more inclusive educational philosophy, underpinned by the Labour Government’s introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act in 2001 (Dept. for Education and Skills, 2001). The 2001 Act strengthened the entitlement of pupils with special needs to attend mainstream schools (Warnock and Norwich, 2010), and for the most part these pupils are supported by TAs (Alborz, Pearson, Farrell and Howes, 2009; Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, Brown, et al., 2011). Over the past two decades there has been much written about the coherence of the inclusive educational policies of various governments (Dyson, 2001; Warnock and Norwich, 2010). Although this important debate is not the topic of this research, it is germane to mention it here because the consequences of a lack of consistency regarding Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) provision - at national and local level - has had an impact on what teaching support staff are expected to deliver in the classroom. The current situation also prompts the question as to whether mainstream TAs are afforded appropriate learning opportunities, in much the same way as the question arises for LSAs in special school classrooms. It would appear from my examination of the literature on this subject that mainstream TAs do not believe they are suitably equipped for these more specialised roles (Keating and O’Connor, 2012; Runswick-Cole, 2008; Symes and Humphrey, 2011). So, whilst my research explores the factors that determine the provision of learning for LSAs in special schools, it is conceivable that my observations will be relevant for learning support staff across more wide-ranging educational settings (unfortunately, the number of mainstream TAs involved in more specialised educational support cannot be ascertained from the figures provided in the DfE’s Statistical First Release data of June 2016).
2.4 The SEND landscape

The SEND landscape has undergone significant change in recent years and the consequences were still being managed at the time of my research. The Children and Families Act (The Stationery Office, 2014) came into effect in September 2014 and fundamentally altered the way SEND provision was co-ordinated in England. Following the introduction of the Act, local authorities must publish detailed information about the SEND services they provide for children and young people in a document known as the ‘Local Offer’ (DfE, 2015a). The Local Offer details information about the local authority’s provision across health, education and social care, which is available to children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities in the local area. However, another important aspect of the Local Offer is that it contains details of the SEND provision that individuals from the local area are accessing outside their authority’s region, primarily because of the lack of adequate provision locally. This means that parents can scrutinise information on their local authority website, and assess the suitability of special schools further afield. Consequently, special schools became part of a competitive environment in which parents have - in theory - choice over the educational placement of their children.

The Children and Families Act (2014) also introduced Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) for children and young people who have more complex learning disabilities and who need specialist educational support. A key objective of EHCPs was to streamline the SEND assessment and delivery process across education, health and care and to bring the contributions from these agencies together more efficiently; the pupil’s local authority is charged with the co-ordination of this document. The educational contribution of the EHCP specifies the type of educational provision needed to meet the person-centred outcomes that are detailed in the plan, along with the associated costs. Because of the increased level of detail required in EHCPs the type of involvement LSAs have in the education of pupils must be clearly stated. On this point an observation by one authority is illuminating ‘[EHCPs] are outcomes focused’ and ‘are not just about teaching assistant hours’ (North Yorkshire Children and Young People’s Service, SEND Conference, February 2014). In light of the increased transparency and availability of information...
via the Local Offer and EHCPs, special schools need to be able to demonstrate that all those involved in the education of pupils with SEND have the necessary knowledge and skills to provide the high standard of education to which pupils are entitled. Local Authorities can also stipulate the qualifications staff must have to be able to support any pupil they are considering placing at a school, for example British Sign Language (BSL) certification, and if the school is unable to ensure that their staff meet these requirements then the local authority would look to place the individual elsewhere. Consequently, the attributes of these specialist support staff are highly visible in an increasingly competitive educational market.

2.4.1 SEND and austerity

The timing of the introduction of the Children and Families Act is worthy of note. The Act came into effect in September 2014 at a time of ongoing and significant public spending reductions, initiated by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2010 (Lupton, 2015), and which are ongoing under the current Conservative government. The extreme nature of these cuts led to the word ‘austerity’ returning to everyday language (Slay and Penny, 2013), as the public became increasingly aware of the extent of the reduction in the amount of funding provided to local authorities (Hastings, Bailey, Bramley, Gannon and Watkins, 2015; The Guardian, 23rd November 2015). The resultant attempts by local authorities to manage their budgets has led to the reduction, or in some cases the closure, of their services for children and young people with SEND, such as specialist provision at mainstream schools and specialist advisory and support services for children with SEND (TUC, March 2015). This has resulted in an increase in demand from parents for special school places. However, unsurprisingly, local authorities struggle to fund this more expensive provision during a time of severe financial constraint, and it is not uncommon for authorities to challenge parental choice (leaving those parents who have the financial resources and considerable mental stamina to take their local authority to a tribunal). There is also the associated issue that the Local Offer and EHCPs, key tenets of the government’s SEND agenda, are coordinated by local authority staff whose numbers have been greatly reduced owing to the ongoing budgetary cut backs (Hastings, A., Bailey, N., Bramley, G., Gannon, M., and Watkins, D, 2015, for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation). It is against this backdrop
that schools are expected to “facilitate the development of the child or young person and to help them achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes” (DfE, 2015a, page 19)

2.5 Government approach to LSAs

In view of the significant rise in employment of TAs and LSAs as a result of government legislation, it is apt to examine the stance of this highly influential stakeholder toward such a sizeable group of employees. Given the emphasis in government policy statements regarding the competence of paraeducators, it is striking that the DfE removed government funding for TA and LSA training and development (Edmond and Hayler, 2013), including the withdrawal of the National Scholarship Fund for Special Educational Needs and Disability support staff (DfE, 2015b). The cessation of this source of DfE funding has meant the opportunity for increasing the knowledge base of this group is dependent on funding at a local level at a time of tight public sector budgetary restrictions, or for paraeducators to fund job-related training and qualifications themselves. The self-funding option is not feasible for many when one considers the average starting salary for TAs and LSAs is £11,500 per year (National Careers Advisory Service at https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk).

The lack of recognition by the government concerning the significant demands on TAs and LSAs was further illustrated by the current Conservative government’s decision not to publish the ‘Professional Standards for Teaching Assistants’ document. This document was completed in the summer of 2016, following consultations initiated by the Liberal Democrat and Conservative Coalition government in 2014. The National Association of Headteachers (NAHT) went on to publish the standards as an advisory document (in the form of recommendations with no statutory backing), on behalf of the various bodies involved in their design (including UNISON, NAHT, the National Education Trust and Maximising Teaching Assistants) stating:
The Professional Standards for Teaching Assistants were originally drafted by a working group set up by the Department for Education (DfE) in conjunction with organisations representing the schools' workforce, practitioners and others also committed to ensuring excellence in education. After completing the standards, the government decided not to publish them and so a number of organisations interested in promoting the work of teaching assistants asked the DfE for permission to publish them. Permission was granted subject to it being made clear that the DfE was no longer involved in the production of the standards.

(naht.org.uk, 10th June 2016)

It is somewhat puzzling that a government that is so exacting in its approach to the requirements of teachers (DfE, 2010; DfE, 2011; National College for Teaching and Leadership, 2014) is so detached from stating expectations on the subject of the practice of TAs and LSAs (Edmond and Hayler, 2013). This oversight is also concerning given that paraeducators who work in English schools, make up twenty-seven per cent of the workforce (DfE, Statistical First Release June 2016), (DfE, 2016b). Whilst many authors are critical of much of the DfE legislation relating to teachers’ standards of practice and the government’s neoliberal stance on education (with the resultant effect on the evaluation of performance and teachers’ professional identity (Evetts, 2009; Hall and McGinity, 2015)), when one considers the influence that TA and LSA support has on pupil progress, then the omission of any standards for this group is troubling. A national policy would promote workplace dialogue on the roles and responsibilities of these paraeducators, as well as provide a platform for discussion regarding their learning and development needs. The lack of acknowledgement of the contribution made by TAs and LSAs is further amplified by government literature that makes few distinctions between the numerous “teaching assistant” roles that exist and the diverse needs of the pupils they support. The advisory standards for teaching assistants published by the NAHT (naht.org.uk, 2016) begins to address the diversity of such roles, including the specialised nature of LSA support, but as the document is not endorsed or published by the DfE there is no guarantee that schools are aware of its existence.
2.6 Limitations in the extant literature

It is not only the DfE that pays scant attention to the distinctions between the numerous classroom support roles, their pupils’ differing needs and the diversity of educational spaces in which teaching takes place. A difficulty when reviewing the literature on the classroom support staff who work with pupils with learning disabilities is that much of the special education literature is concerned with the contribution of TAs working in inclusive, rather than special school, environments and with students who have less complex special educational needs and disabilities, but who nevertheless require a high level of individual support, for example pupils with ASD (Symes and Humphrey, 2011). Furthermore, much of the writing debates the impact of TA support on pupils’ academic attainment (defined in terms of grades achieved in national tests), with much of the focus on the detrimental impact of TA support on such attainment (Saddler, 2014; Webster and Blatchford, 2015). There is noticeably less literature that addresses the learning requirements of LSAs who specifically support the education of pupils with low incidence learning disabilities in special schools (some notable exceptions being Aird, 2000; Guldberg, Parsons, MacLeod, Jones, et al, 2011; Lamb, 2009; Salt, 2010). These are students for whom the milestones of academic achievement are not an appropriate indicator of progression on their learning journey.

An evaluation of the literature on the learning opportunities provided specifically for LSAs is made all the more problematic because of the wealth of terms for employees who provide learning support, for example, Teaching Assistant, Classroom Support Staff, Paraeducator and Learning Support Assistant. My point about the nomenclature is important, because the blending of terms disguises fundamental differences in these roles and their concomitant responsibilities, for example those who support pupils with low incidence learning disabilities to engage in learning activities (Alborz, Pearson, Farrell and Howes, 2009) and those who assist students in mainstream classrooms to make academic progress (Webster, Blatchford, Bassett, et al., 2010). This is an important point from a workforce development perspective, because the learning requirements of these various paraeducators are contingent on their pedagogical role. Given this lack of clarity, it is perhaps unsurprising that the literature highlights mixed findings on the success of the training on offer to
classroom support staff, as well as querying whether changes in practice are sustained over time (Howlin, Gordon, Pasco, Wade and Charman, 2007; Ling and Mak, 2012).

2.7 Approaches to workplace learning

The literature relating to workplace learning discusses the different approaches adopted by employers - formal, informal and non-formal - and the various ways they contribute to employee development.

2.7.1 Formal learning

A useful definition of formal learning, and one that is representative of the definitions in the literature, is provided by Werquin (2010) for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD):

Formal learning is learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). It is intentional from the learner’s point of view and typically leads to validation and certification

(Werquin, 2010, page 21)

It is commonplace for employers to cite employee attendance at formal learning events as evidence of the skills of the workforce, and yet many researchers illustrate the short-sightedness of such an approach (James, Guile and Unwin, 2013; Keep and Mayhew, 2010), concluding that “not all valuable learning is formal or accredited” (Gibson, 2011, page 3). However, as Fuller, Munro and Rainbird (2004) note, the benefit provided by formal learning is that:
There are types of knowledge, such as theoretical ideas not connected to specific contexts, which are not always accessible on-the-job. Denying individuals and groups access to underpinning knowledge is likely to reinforce workforce inequalities and impede employees’ progression to positions which benefit from sound theoretical understanding.

(Fuller, et al., 2004, page 3)

An important consideration when contemplating the value of formal training is the extent to which employees take their learning from one setting and transfer it to another; for example, using knowledge gained from a university course and developing it in the workplace. Whilst employers have a role to play in facilitating this transfer by providing workplace opportunities for consolidation of off-site learning, the personal motivation of employees will also influence the outcome (Kersh, 2015).

2.7.1.1 Apprenticeships

At this stage I want to mention apprenticeship schemes, which combine formal and non-formal approaches to learning. Apprenticeships are:

[F]ull-time paid jobs which incorporate on and off the job training. A successful apprentice will receive a nationally recognised qualification on the completion of their contract.

(Mirza-Davis, 2016, page 3)

Whilst apprenticeships have come in different shapes and guises for many decades (Fuller and Unwin, 2011), they became an area of renewed interest under the Coalition government in 2010 and continue to be subject of attention for the current Conservative government. Government figures for England state that between 2010 and 2015 more than two million apprenticeships were started (Mirza-Davis, 2016) with a pledge to have three million more apprentices employed by 2020. Whilst the government claimed success in this initiative mid-way through the Coalition parliament, many queried whether the statistics stood up to scrutiny and whether
employers offer meaningful learning opportunities, (Dolphin and Lanning, 2011; Fuller, Leonard, Unwin and Davey, 2015; Hordern, 2015).

There are numerous articles discussing examples of apprenticeships in different industries (Hogarth, Gambin and Hasluck, 2012; Hordern, 2015), but the study by Smith (2010) is particularly relevant here since it explored the opinions of teaching assistants on the subject. Smith examined the views of experienced teaching assistants on the prospect of TA apprenticeships and concluded that novice TAs would not be afforded the socially embedded learning experiences in the manner discussed by Fuller and Unwin (2004b). Smith argued that experienced TAs were resistant to the introduction of “‘low achieving’ school leavers” into the paraeducator workforce. The author commented that the TAs feared the employment of apprentices would reduce the higher status they had been afforded following workforce remodelling, and the resultant increase in their educational responsibilities. This gave rise to uncertainty as to the nature of the “tasks they might become involved in and the scheme’s general level of aspiration” (Smith, 2010, page 377). I have been unable to establish the number of teaching assistants and LSAs who are employed on apprenticeship schemes in England, but it is an approach to workplace learning that I will explore at my research school.

2.7.1.2 Vocational Qualifications

Vocational qualifications are a key aspect of apprentice learning and the various courses (and associated level of competency) are stipulated in the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). It is important to note, however, that employees can - and many do - undertake regulated vocational qualifications outside of an apprenticeship scheme. The RQF (Ofqual, 2015a) was introduced in October (Ofqual, 2015b), replacing the Qualifications and Credit Framework and the National Qualifications Framework. The RQF aimed to simplify the system of cataloguing all Ofqual regulated qualifications and the framework concentrates on two key descriptors. The first descriptor is ‘Qualification Level’ (where Level 1 equates to General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades D-G and National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 1, and the highest qualification is a Doctorate at Level 8). The second descriptor is ‘Qualification Size’, which denotes the ‘Total Qualification Time’ (TQT). TQT indicates the estimated total time for
completion of the qualification, when both personal study time and the time accrued in supervised learning is taken into consideration. The framework is also designed to show employers and employees how they can progress to higher qualification levels (should they need to demonstrate competence in this way for promotion), or if employees chose to do so for their own development.

My review of potential vocational qualifications that may benefit LSAs in special schools (and TAs who work with pupils with more complex learning difficulties in mainstream environments) showed there are numerous accredited vocational courses in ‘Teaching and Learning’, such as the Level 3 Certificate in ‘Supporting Teaching and Learning’ and the Level 3 Diploma in ‘Specialist Support for Teaching and Learning in Schools’. These qualifications are competency based with various methods of assessment, such as workplace observation and the creation of portfolios of evidence of practice. Currently, the Total Qualification Time is not listed against the Support for Teaching NVQs on the RQF or providers’ websites, however as an indication of the type of learning considered suitable for course completion, the amount of ‘Guided Learning Hours’ - ‘[the] time typically spent being taught or supervised, rather than studying alone’ (Ofqual, 2015b, page 2, my emphasis) - is a useful indicator. For example, the Level 3 Certificate requires 180 GLH and the Level 3 Diploma requires 260 GLH.

Whilst the focus on the number of guided learning hours would suggest that the emphasis is on supervised learning in the workplace, the calibre of some vocational qualifications on offer and the quality of the individuals who act as supervisors, has been questioned in the literature. For example, the Cavendish Review looked at the quality of care in the NHS and social care settings and this included scrutiny of the quality of the training and supervision provided for unregistered Healthcare Assistants and Support Workers. In her review Cavendish noted:

*Given what the Review has heard about the low value of some vocational qualifications, it is correct to place the emphasis on staff performance, rather than qualifications. But more clarity is needed about what constitutes “appropriate” training, and whether staff are adequately supervised*  

(Cavendish, 2013, page 39)
Cavendish is not alone in questioning the value of NVQs. Other authors have criticised the system of NVQs for providing certification “to uncertain standards” (Gospel and Lewis, 2011, page 605) for competences that individuals already have and not for the attainment of new skills that lead to an improvement in the quality of their practice, “[i]n many cases the NVQ offers a form of accreditation of prior learning whereby skills the individual already possess are certified” (Keep and Mayhew, 2010, page 572).

The literature also concluded that the content of the nationally recognised vocational training in supporting teaching and learning did not meet the specialist requirements of classroom support staff who supported pupils with more complex learning difficulties, (Abbot, McConkey and Dobbins, 2011; Douglas, Light and McNaughton, 2013; Martin and Alborz, 2014) because the focus of such qualifications was on addressing competencies designed around a typical mainstream classroom. This situation may improve over the coming months since a change to the ‘General Conditions of Recognition’ (Ofqual, 2015b) for vocational qualifications (introduced in conjunction with the Regulated Qualifications Framework in October 2015), allows awarding bodies to ‘design qualifications that meet the needs of those who use them’ (Ofqual, 2015b, page 7). This revision has the potential to help LSAs (and mainstream TAs who work with pupils with more severe learning disabilities), but it is too soon to assess whether any training providers have incorporated additional modules into their courses to address this oversight. Given the rise in pupils requiring specialised support, in both mainstream and special schools, such an addition would be a highly auspicious one to make.

2.7.2 Informal learning

The second approach to learning in the workplace is through ‘informal’ learning situations, and the following quote captures the essence of this:
Informal learning refers to learning that is not provided by an educational or training institution. Instead, informal learning is closely associated with experience and practice ... Informal learning may be intentional, but in most cases, it is non-intentional, incidental or random

(Nilsson and Rubenson, 2014, page 2)

Waring and Bishop (2010), in their ethnographic study, which took place in two NHS Day Surgery Units, studied the “backstage” places in which informal learning takes place, such as corridors and staff rooms. These authors summed up this type of informal knowledge sharing as “water cooler” learning, whereby:

The process of reflection, sense-making and learning make a less conspicuous, but perhaps more holistic and direct contribution to clinical work than formalised learning mechanisms

(Waring and Bishop, 2010, page 338)

Given the “backstage” locations in schools, such as the corridors and staff rooms noted by Waring and Bishop, I speculate that there is potential for this type of informal learning between employees at my research organisation.

2.7.3 Non-formal learning

Whilst the concept discussed by Waring and Bishop (2010) is often referred to as ‘informal’ learning in the literature, some researchers also use the term ‘non-formal’ to capture learning that does not fall into the formal category. Indeed, the application and definition of the terms ‘informal’ and ‘non-formal’ learning are not wholly consistent in the literature with authors differing in their views on the construct, and utility, of the ‘non-formal’ idiom (Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley, 2003; Manuti, Pastore, Scardigno, Giancaspro and Morciano, 2015). Despite the lack of consensus, I make a distinction between these two terms in this dissertation, because this will help highlight the nuances of the learning environment at my research organisation. The definition of non-formal learning as applied to my research is that it is:
... organised and can have learning objectives. It is a way of learning where not only the content is important but where there is also a strong emphasis on practical experience

(Kyndt, Dochy and Nijs, 2009, page 370)

Examples of non-formal learning would be observations and feedback between colleagues while supporting students in classes, demonstrations of practice during class meetings, and when a teacher works with LSAs on-the-job to model students’ sessions. Research highlights that LSAs value non-formal learning opportunities given the nature of their work, and the chance such training offers for them to develop their classroom practice (Martin and Alborz, 2014). As Felstead and Unwin (2016) note:

_Tellingly, attending training courses and achieving qualifications were relatively low-rated for improving work performance compared to many of the ‘learning as participation’ activities_

(Felstead and Unwin, 2016, page 9)

And so, formal, informal and non-formal approaches all have a role to play in employee learning and yet most workplaces:

[S]til to equate learning with formal education and training, and assume that working and learning are two quite separate activities that never overlap, whereas our findings have always demonstrated the opposite, i.e. that most workplace learning occurs on the job rather than off the job

(Eraut, 2004, page 249)

2.7.4 Communities of Practice

Earlier in this chapter I discussed Smith’s (2010) pessimistic outlook regarding the lack of potential that apprenticeships have for TAs. However, in his article the author made a point about the benefit of being employed on an effective apprenticeship
scheme and this is something I want to return to here. Smith (2010) comments that through apprenticeships:

*Participation in multiple communities of practice, both inside and outside the workplace is also enabled*

(Smith, 2010, page 369)

The importance of learning through participation came to the fore through the writing of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in their influential work ‘*Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*’ (published in 1991), which focused on the learning trajectory of apprentices and introduced the concept of ‘*situated learning*’, in which active social participation was the central conduit for learning. Their work was acknowledged as being an important development in the field, and an outcome of this work was the creation of the term ‘*Communities of Practice*’. Subsequently, in 1998, Wenger (now writing as Wenger-Trayner) built on this earlier work in ‘*Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*’, broadening out his focus from apprentices to employee learning more widely. He continues to develop the concepts within this social learning theory to the present day (Farnsworth, Kleanthous and Wenger-Trayner, 2016). Wenger defines a ‘*community of practice*’ as a group of individuals who share a common concern for something they do, and termed it a ‘domain’. Through their interactions, members of the community learn to undertake the practice with increasing competence (Campbell, Verenikina and Herrington, 2009). In this way, Wenger’s notion of a domain of practice is ‘*the area in which a community claims to have legitimacy to define competence*’ (Farnsworth, et al., 2016, page 143). Members help each other, share information and build relationships, learning from one another and developing a shared repertoire of resources on which to draw, such as experiences and artefacts. Membership of a community of practice shapes the identity of individual members and in turn the members shape the identity of the community itself. Because the development of practice requires an investment of time members need to sustain sufficient joint engagement, ‘*from this perspective communities of practice can be thought of as shared histories of learning*’ (Wenger, 1998, page 86). In the following quote, Printy (2008) describes the benefits of membership of such a community for teachers, although her quote could apply equally well to paraeducators:
As teachers come to new understandings together, the learning they experience as part of community participation has the potential to make them better teachers ... the learning process enables teachers to draw on and benefit from the collective resources of the community

(Printy, 2008, page 190)

Since Wenger published his book in 1998 there has been extensive critique on the topic, for example how communities of practice can frustrate the transfer of knowledge across different groups (Filstad, 2014) and questioning Wenger’s assumption that “workplaces are coherent communities where the skilful are available for novices to consult and observe” (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2011, page 342).

Wenger has developed his theory (Wenger, 2010; Farnsworth, et al., 2016) and brought other aspects mentioned in his earlier work to the foreground, for example more complex ‘learning landscapes’ (Wenger-Trailner, E., Fenton-O’Creevy, Hutchinson, et al., 2015), which consist of different communities with their own domains, histories, systems of competence and boundaries. The concept of ‘knowledgeability’ was added, reflecting “a person’s connection with a multiplicity of practices across the landscape” (Kubiak, Fenton-O’Creevy, Appleby, et al., 2015, page 81). The part played by ‘brokers’ (introduced in Wenger’s earlier writing) is also noteworthy, since they work “at the boundaries of the landscape building connections between different practices, introducing practices from elsewhere and facilitating cross-boundary experiences” (ibid).

Within a special school setting, such as my research organisation, there are many potential communities of practice (for example, teachers and LSAs within the school), and communities outside the school (for example employees working for Cedars Trust) and communities further afield (such as other special and mainstream schools and local authorities). These communities have the capacity to inform the practice of LSAs (and vice versa); furthermore, LSAs may be in a position to act as brokers and encourage the sharing of practices across the learning landscape.
2.8 Teachers and their role in LSA training

Given the importance of teachers in the provision of on-the-job learning, it was disappointing to note that there was barely any literature devoted to teacher guided instruction for LSAs who work with pupils with low incidence learning disabilities. Indeed, the majority of the special education literature in this area evaluated the supervision of TAs working with pupils in inclusive settings (for example, Douglas, Chapin and Nolan, 2016), with very few authors discussing the amount of supervision provided by teachers to LSAs in special schools (Martin and Alborz, 2014). However, a common theme that emerged from the published work (in both inclusive and special schools) was that classroom support staff (who work with pupils with complex learning difficulties) received inadequate levels of supervision from their class teachers. The main reason given for this was the lack of time teachers had to devote to this activity (Cockcroft and Atkinson, 2015; Docherty, 2014). It is interesting to note, from a US study by Douglas, Chapin and Nolan (2016), that LSAs who support pupils with low incidence learning disabilities are required by US federal law to receive training and supervision from a registered professional, such as an SEN teacher. However, despite this requirement, these authors found that SEN teachers spent only 7% of their day supervising LSAs.

A further obstacle to appropriate supervision is that many LSAs work out of sight of their classroom teacher for a large part of the school day, since the pupils’ specialised sessions mean they are often educated in individual learning spaces. The lack of teacher proximity to their staff also limits the opportunity for spontaneous feedback, which is important for developing confidence and creating a ‘positive learning culture of mutual support’ (Eraut, 2014, page 57).

Although the promotion of workplace learning within special schools may be challenging, the research studying nurse managers was illuminating in this regard (Matsuo, 2012). Matsuo’s work surveyed nurse managers and focused on learning at “the work-unit level because the effect of leadership on learning seems to be stronger at the work-unit level than at the organizational level” (page 610) and explored “the interrelated characteristics of leadership behaviors that facilitate workplace learning” (page 618). The author’s unit of analysis is of interest, given
that one of the areas being explored in my research is the influence teachers have on the learning of LSAs in their class teams. The role of class teachers is comparable to nurse managers, who have responsibility for the promotion of teamwork amongst ward based nursing staff to raise and maintain a high standard of nursing care, in the same way teachers are responsible for maintaining a high standard of educational provision. Matsuo found that a significant factor in the promotion of workplace learning was the encouragement of reflective practice by the nurse managers. Given the expectation on teachers to reflect on their own practice (Boulton and Hramiak, 2012; Ohlsson, 2013) it will be interesting to explore whether teachers advance this approach with their class teams. The nurse managers also drove workplace learning by ensuring their staff knew the goals of the ward and by championing role modelling. It will be of interest to note the extent to which such practices are encouraged by teachers with their LSAs.

Private sector research can also inform my work. Hodgkinson’s (2000) study investigated organisational learning by canvassing the views of middle managers employed in a large multinational private sector company. These managers identified important aspects of a managerial role as “providing encouragement and support to bring out the potential of their team members, to allow information exchange and to act as a facilitator” (2000, page 163). Despite identification of these attributes the author concluded that the organisation did not promote a team working culture, as well as citing examples of how a lack of effective communication led to insufficient cross organisational knowledge and understanding. Participants commented that the problems stemmed from “too many personal agendas, [and] that the company is too big and that it is too segregated” (ibid). These observations could be directed towards organisations regardless of the sector in which they operate and I will explore whether any such factors emerge in my research.

What is more, when considering the responsibilities associated with being the line manager of a class team, research indicates that teachers are not confident in this role. Indeed, in a review of studies carried out in the UK, USA and Australia and germane to this subject, Cajkler, Sage, Tennant, Tuknaz, et al., (2007) concluded that teachers are ill prepared to manage classroom support staff effectively. This brings me to my next consideration, that of the part played by school leaders in ensuring
their employees have the capabilities to accomplish their work. If teachers do not possess the skills to manage their class teams and supervise staff as required, it is the Headteacher who is ultimately accountable.

2.9 School leaders and workplace learning

The influence of school leaders on the development of their workforce, and the resultant effect on pupil attainment, has been the subject of government scrutiny for some time (DfE, 2016a). Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Harris et al., (2010), in their report ‘10 strong claims about successful school leadership’, focused on the role school leaders had in the promotion of workplace learning. These authors commented:

[Heads] placed a high premium on internally led professional development and learning, but teachers and support staff were also encouraged to take part in a wide range of in-service training (Inset), and were given the opportunity to train for external qualifications. The combination of external and internal continuing professional development (CPD) was used to maximise potential and develop staff in diverse areas

(Day et al., 2010, page 6)

The importance of senior management backing for LSAs to participate in learning and development activities, and the resultant positive effect such support had on LSA confidence and level of skill, was also noted in Balshaw’s (2010) research. However, some words of caution need to be expressed regarding the reality of senior management support for employee learning. As Campbell (2014) points out, the DfE’s cessation in central funding for the professional development of school staff has resulted in individual schools choosing priorities for their limited budgets “which are not always about professional learning” (2014, page 171).

Furthermore, Eraut’s (2014) observation on the learning culture of many organisations is pertinent:

Continuing professional learning is now beginning to be asked to measure its ultimate impact on service users. This is an absurd idea because, although a well-
conceived course can be an excellent learning event, it cannot be a complete learning package that delivers the desired outcomes. That normally requires a considerable further amount of on-the-job learning, and this will only happen if the learning is treated as a high priority by the participants’ work group.

(Eraut, 2014, page 70)

Another point needs to be made here, in that on-the-job learning may be “treated as a high priority” by staff at all levels in an organisation, but pressures and demands from internal and external stakeholders will influence the extent to which competing priorities are managed.

2.10 Individual engagement and learning

Notwithstanding the important part played by leaders and managers in facilitating organisational learning, responsibility also rests with the employees themselves. For example, their willingness to participate in the generation and dissemination of knowledge to others (Illeris, 2003; Turner, Mavin and Minocha, 2006), how proactive they choose to be in their own learning trajectory (Bryson, Pajo, Ward and Mallon, 2006), and the extent to which they want to engage in learning activities (Draper, Oltean-Dumbrava, Kara-Zaitri and Newbury, 2014). Bryson, Pajo, Ward and Mallon’s (2006) description is helpful in this regard:

*Individual engagement is the process by which a participant chooses to take up the opportunities present in the workplace, a decision determined by a participant’s values, knowledge, understandings and learning history.*

(Bryson, et al., 2006, page 284 - 285)

And yet, research indicates that there is not always a level playing field in terms of the learning opportunities available to employees, even when they readily seek them out; although the conclusions drawn are ambiguous. For example, some studies conclude that learning and development provision is less readily available to older workers (Coetzer, 2007), whilst other studies report that age was not a barrier to learning. For example, Berg and Chyung (2008) noted that “as age increased, so did the tendency to learn by searching the web and reading printed professional
magazines and journals” (page 238). However, the mixed findings in the literature should not be surprising, given the range of occupations studied and reported (Harteis, Billett, Goller, Rausch and Seifried, 2015) and the increasing variation in the ways in which work in the modern workplace is organised (Fuller and Unwin, 2005).

2.11 Staff retention

Given the nature of the job, it is unsurprising that many LSAs who work with pupils with complex learning needs suffer from stress (Leyin and Wakerly, 2007), in particular those who work with pupils who display challenging behaviour, because of the need for constant vigilance and to act quickly when behavioural incidents happen. In addition, pupils with very complex learning difficulties often struggle to engage in their curriculum and as a result disrupt the learning of their peers. Time away from educational sessions can detrimentally affect the pupil’s learning targets and consequently the school’s performance data, adding to the pressure felt by staff. Research also indicates that ongoing staff stress gives rise to an employee’s reduced ability to deal with challenging behaviour appropriately (Hastings, 2002). Workplace stress also leads to high rates of sickness absence and staff turnover (Devereux, Hastings and Noone, 2009).

A study by Arnetz, Lucas and Arnetz (2011) explored the relationship between organisational efficiency and organisational climate. In the study the researchers operationalised organisational climate using four variables, which were: social climate (e.g. working atmosphere), participatory management (e.g. employees’ influence on decision making), goal clarity, and performance feedback. Arnetz and colleagues found that these four variables were all related to organisational efficiency:

[Which] suggest that interventions targeting both the traditional psychosocial environment and organizational efficiency might contribute to both decreased employee stress and enhanced well-being. In addition, organizational performance is likely to improve

(Arnetz, et al., 2011, page 40)
The findings imply that organisations where employees are routinely exposed to stressful events (such as staff in special schools), should consider not only providing psychological support and training, but also address issues of role clarity, ensure that an appropriate performance management system in place, and involve staff at all levels of the organisation in decision making. Not only would such measures contribute to organisational effectiveness, but would also have a beneficial effect on staff morale. Indeed, a well-defined performance management strategy can also address the issues of low pay and uncertain career paths that are additional reasons given by LSAs for leaving the job (Tillery, Werts, Roark and Harris, 2003).

Furthermore, given the focus on workplace learning in this thesis, an important conclusion drawn from the wealth of organisational learning literature is that providing staff with learning and development opportunities is important for employee retention (Eraut, 2014; Govaerts, Kyndt, Dochy and Baert, 2011). This is strongly suggestive that organisations struggling to hold on to staff should have effective employee learning strategies in place and ensure they are properly administered. In addition, a constant turnover of workers means that an organisation is hindered in its development and reification of the organisational artefacts that facilitate employee understanding and practice (Fuller and Unwin, 2004a), as well as being limited in the extent to which ‘shared histories’ of learning can develop (Wenger, 1998).

2.12 The Working as Learning Framework

A fundamental point I made at the beginning of this chapter was that “everyone who works with disabled children and children with SEN should have high expectations of them and the skills to help them to learn” (DfE, 2012, page 11, my emphasis). In this chapter I have illustrated that there is little in the SEND literature to provide guidance as to how LSAs gain the necessary skills for the challenging work they do. Therefore, to help my understanding of workplace learning I widened the scope of the literature I reviewed and looked at research on organisational learning more generally. What became clear was that internal and external factors influence an organisation’s ability to provide learning opportunities for employees, and it became
apparent to me that a special school is no different in this regard. As Matsuo (2012) notes:

Creating the type of conditions that facilitate and sustain a favourable level of collective learning is one of the greatest challenges for leadership at all levels in organizations

(Matsuo, 2012, page 609)

With this in mind, and to help me frame my understanding of the situation at my research organisation, I turned to The Working as Learning Framework (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson and Unwin, 2009), because of its comprehensive approach to the investigation of workplace learning. The Working as Learning Framework (WALF) (Felstead, et al., 2009) has as its central tenets ‘productive systems’, ‘work organisation’ and ‘learning environments’. A further feature within the aspect of learning environments are ‘learning territories’, which “refer to the totality of past and present learning experiences of employees, and the ways in which these shape their dispositions to pursue learning in the workplace in the here and now” (Felstead, et al., 2009, page 30).

2.12.1 WALF: Productive systems

The WALF draws on the concept of ‘productive systems’ from economic theory, advocated by economists such as Frank Wilkinson (1983). Wilkinson expressed dissatisfaction with the application of primarily abstract approaches to economic reasoning, in which socio-political variables were presumed to play a minor role in the operation of economic markets:

The defect of this approach is that it fails to comprehend the central role of institutions in economic development and the inextricable link between social, political and economic forces in determining how economies function

(Wilkinson, 1983, page 413)

Since learning in the workplace occurs in a “dynamic context ... including wider regulatory, sectoral and organisational characteristics” (Fuller et al., 2007, page
the authors of the WALF identified the analytical utility of using a productive systems approach in their research.

[The] WALF identifies two axis of productive systems: vertical interconnections of scale, or ‘structures of production’, which range from international governance at the macro level down to the individual workplace; and horizontal interconnections of transformation, referred to as ‘stages of production’ that flow from the sourcing of raw materials through to the consumption of end products. Each axis is composed of constituent parts, which themselves take the form of networks of social relations

(Felstead, Fuller, Jewson and Unwin, 2011, page 7)

In Figure A, below, I illustrate the structures and stages of production as per Felstead and colleagues’ (2009, page 19) model.

**Figure A: Felstead et al (2009) Productive Systems**

**A: Structures of Production**

| International Governance |
| National State Government |
| Sector Regulatory Bodies |
| Organisational Ownership |
| Senior Management |
| Regional Divisions |
| Local Workplace |

**B: Stages of Production**

| Sourcing raw materials | Manufacture | Wholesale | Distribution | Retail | Consumption |
A key aspect of the concept of productive systems proposed in the WALF that was of interest, given my research context, was the authors’ argument that:

“analysis of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of productive systems leads us to consider how the articulation of the structures and stages of productive systems together shape and influence learning at work”

(Felstead, et al., 2009, page 21, my emphasis)

Analysis of a productive system also enables the identification of the sphere of influence and control that different stakeholders exercise at different levels in the hierarchy. For example, the sphere of control a macro stakeholder (such as the DfE) can exert, is greater than that of stakeholders at a micro level (for example LSAs), whose sphere of control is more restricted. In addition, the amount of discretion an employee at the micro level is afforded will also be shaped by the organisation in which they work (such as in a highly-regulated sector). But this is not to say that employees at the micro level are unable to exert control over the outcomes of decisions further up the structural hierarchy, as they can do so by overt or covert means.

2.12.2 WALF: Work organisation and discretion

Task discretion is the “degree of initiative that employees can exercise over their immediate work tasks” (Gallie, Felstead and Green, 2012, page 243). In their Working as Learning Framework, the authors (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson and Unwin, 2011; Felstead, et al., 2009) describe discretion as “the degree of autonomy and responsibility exercised by workers in the labour process in which they are engaged” (Felstead, et al., 2009, page 24, my emphasis). At the centre of the affordance of discretion is the extent to which employers trust the abilities and skills of their staff to exercise appropriate judgement in the design, execution and evaluation of their work activities and commensurate with organisational expectations. The literature concludes that increased employee discretion is associated with positive outcomes for the learning and development of employees (Billett, 2015) and organisational performance (Inanc, Zhou, Gallie, et al., 2015). It will be apparent, from the discussion of the literature earlier in this thesis, that
paraeducators are given a significant amount of discretion in the work they do. A point worthy of exploration in this dissertation will be whether discretion is permitted because this group of staff are trusted by their managers to fulfil the role of educator, or whether the autonomous way in which they work occurs because of pressures from within the wider productive system. What is also indicated in the literature on LSAs (and TAs who work in mainstream schools with pupils who have SEND), is that they do not feel adequately prepared for their specialised educational role. And so, another factor in need of consideration in this research is how comfortable these classroom support staff are with the discretion they are afforded, since the positive outcomes reported in the literature apply to workers who have ready access to managerial and peer support when needed, and who are not working in isolated situations.

Felstead et al (2009) highlight three specific areas of discretion in their framework:

- Discretion in the conception of work involves the extent to which employees have control over the aims and objectives of their work process
- Discretion in work execution involves control over the way in which given objectives are attained and tasks are executed
- Discretion in the evaluation of work outcomes involves taking responsibility for monitoring work outcomes

(Felstead, et al, 2009, page 24, my emphasis)

It is unclear from the literature the extent to which LSAs have responsibility for these different aspects of their pupils’ educational provision and is, therefore, an area that will be explored in my study.

Organisational artefacts also have a role to play in the amount of discretion afforded employees. The latitude workers have to exercise their initiative in the use of artefacts will be dependent on the nature of the productive system in which their organisation resides. For example, in my highly-regulated research setting there are numerous mandatory documents and rigid computerised systems for recording pupil
information, which are subject to internal and external scrutiny and this leaves little room for individuals to exercise discretion.

2.12.3 WALF: Approaches to Workforce Development

The demands placed on an organisation by its productive system, along with the type and extent of discretion afforded its workforce, will shape the resultant “learning environment” experienced by its workers (Felstead, at al., 2009). Furthermore, the learning environment is affected by the individual “learning territories” of employees, since the accumulation of a person’s learning experiences will shape the extent to which they involve themselves in their own learning and development.

The concept of learning environments draws on Fuller and Unwin’s (2004a) extensive research, which led to the development of their ‘expansive – restrictive’ framework. Since organisations vary in the way they construct learning environments, the expectation is that those championing more expansive approaches will be more committed in their promotion of learning at work (Fuller, Unwin, Felstead, Jewson and Kakavelakis, 2007). Fuller and Unwin (2004a) originally created their expansive-restrictive paradigm to explain how apprentices’ learning experiences differed in relation to the learning environment in which they worked (even when the apprentices worked in the same industry and were at the same level in the organisational hierarchy). The extent to which apprentices were afforded “a dual identity as workers and learners for the duration of their apprenticeship” (Fuller and Unwin, 2016, page 70) was an important factor in shaping the quality of their learning. Whilst Fuller and Unwin’s framework began by examining the quality of apprenticeships and is an area that continues to be of importance (Fuller and Unwin, 2016), the insights they provide are relevant to all employees, irrespective of the position they hold in an organisation, and whether or not apprenticeship schemes are in place. As can be seen in Figure B, overleaf, these researchers take into consideration the influence of pedagogical, cultural and organisational features in their model of organisational approaches to workforce development.

Fox, Deaney and Wilson (2010) studied the views of new teachers regarding the expansive and restrictive nature of their schools and concluded that whilst the teachers reported their workplaces were mostly expansive, concerns were raised
about the availability of support from more experienced colleagues. The lack of availability of colleagues was due to pressure of time, a theme which was present in my review of the literature (Cockcroft and Atkinson, 2015; Docherty, 2014; Douglas, Chapin and Nolan, 2016). Fox, et al., (2010) also commented on the different approaches taken by teachers in accessing the support they needed, with some being highly proactive and others adopting a passive attitude. The availability of staff to support their colleagues’ learning will be explored in my research, as will the proactive and passive stance of employees toward their own learning.

**Figure B: Approaches to Workforce Development**

From Fuller and Unwin, 2004a, page 130*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPANSIVE</th>
<th>RESTRICTIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in multiple communities of practice inside and outside the workplace</td>
<td>Restricted participation in multiple communities of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary community of practice has shared ‘participative memory’: cultural inheritance of workforce development</td>
<td>Primary community of practice has little or no ‘participative memory’: no or little tradition of apprenticeship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breadth: access to learning fostered by cross-company experiences</td>
<td>Narrow: access to learning restricted in terms of tasks/knowledge/location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to range of qualifications including knowledge-based vocational qualifications</td>
<td>Little or no access to qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned time off-the-job including for knowledge-based courses and for reflection</td>
<td>Virtually all-on-job: limited opportunities for reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gradual transition to full, rounded participation</td>
<td>Fast-transition as quick as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision of workplace learning: progression for career</td>
<td>Vision of workplace learning: static for job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational recognition of, and support for employees as learners</td>
<td>Lack of organizational recognition of, and support for employees as learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workforce development is used as a vehicle for aligning the goals of developing the</td>
<td>Workforce development is used to tailor individual capability to organizational need</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### individual and organizational capability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workforce development fosters opportunities to extend identity through boundary crossing</th>
<th>Workforce development limits opportunities to extend identity: little boundary crossing experienced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reification of ‘workplace curriculum’ highly developed (e.g. through documents, symbols, language, tools) and accessible to apprentices</td>
<td>Limited reification of ‘workplace curriculum’ patchy access to reificatory aspects of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widely distributed skills</td>
<td>Polarized distribution of skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical skills valued</td>
<td>Technical skills taken for granted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and skills of whole workforce developed and valued</td>
<td>Knowledge and skills of key workers/groups developed and valued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team work valued</td>
<td>Rigid specialist roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-boundary communication encouraged</td>
<td>Bounded communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managers as facilitators of workforce and individual development</td>
<td>Managers as controllers of workforce and individual development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chances to learn new skills/jobs</td>
<td>Barriers to learning new skills/jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovation important</td>
<td>Innovation not important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multidimensional view of expertise</td>
<td>Uni-dimensional top-down view of expertise</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*the list is not intended to be exhaustive*

### 2.13 Conclusion

From my preceding discussion, it follows that LSAs must be appropriately equipped to “*maximise the educational opportunities*” (Imray and Hinchcliffe, 2014, page xii) of pupils with very complex learning needs. And yet the literature and current government policy provides little assistance as to how this can be accomplished.

There has been a sizeable increase in the number of teaching assistants who have been given responsibility for delivering significant levels of educational support to pupils in mainstream schools (The Guardian, 10th February 2017) and, as a result, a good deal of the debate has focused on the quality of provision delivered by this group of paraeducators. Furthermore, to a lesser extent the literature has considered the ways in which this group of staff have been equipped to undertake the role.

However, there has been very little attention paid to LSAs who work with pupils
with complex learning disabilities, and how the learning and development needs of this specialist group of educators can be met. As I have illustrated in this chapter, there are mixed messages from the DfE on the area of the education of pupils with special educational needs and those who support them. The government’s expectations of teachers to have appropriate specialist qualifications and to meet detailed standards of practice are not mirrored in their approach to LSAs, to whom the government has taken a surprisingly relaxed stance. The significant part played by LSAs in the delivery of individualised educational programmes requires detailed understanding of SEND and related pedagogy, and yet there are no mandatory qualifications or national standards of practice for these educators. Given the nature of the educational support LSAs provide it follows that a significant amount of their learning and development should be located in the workplace. It is also apparent that teachers have a fundamental role to play in furthering the knowledge and practice of their LSAs, yet researchers describe how other work demands keep teachers from fulfilling this obligation. The situation is exacerbated because the teachers themselves report they lack the skills and confidence to manage their staff effectively.

Furthermore, in the past two years there have been significant changes to SEND legislation and schools, and local authorities, are still navigating the resultant policies. And whilst the attitude of Headteachers is of paramount importance in shaping the learning culture of a school, in these fiscally challenging times these senior managers walk the tightrope of balancing the individual learning needs of their staff against provision of training that will assist in meeting policy goals; or directing scarce financial resources to other areas of their educational budgets.

I have touched on some of the issues that are problematic when trying to provide LSAs with the learning opportunities they need to equip them to fulfil their specialist learning support role, but as I have emphasised there was little information in the educational and SEND literature on which I could draw to inform my study. In turning to the research and writings on organisational learning, it became apparent that I should not restrict my thinking to educational settings, or to the SEND sector specifically, but that I needed to consider theoretical approaches to workplace learning more generally. The Working as Learning Framework (Felstead, et al.,
2009; Fuller and Unwin, 2004a) with its comprehensive stance, offered a useful lens through which to explore the factors that influenced workplace learning at Willowbank special school. Furthermore, by framing my analysis using the WALF I could identify multiple factors that shaped the learning environment for LSAs at the school and how this affected the educational provision for its pupils. Having used the WALF to assist me to determine where the issues lay, I was able to highlight where effort needs to be targeted to tackle the complex subject of LSA learning in a special school. And my findings and the subsequent conclusions I drew are presented in the chapters that follow.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

It is helpful at the outset to remind the reader of the research question, as this has a significant bearing on the methodological stance adopted and so I reiterate it here:

\textit{What factors influence whether Learning Support Assistants are equipped to provide specialised educational support to pupils with complex learning difficulties?}

From my reading of the literature, and my pre-existing awareness of the subject, it was apparent that the availability and constitution of learning and development provision for LSAs has barely been researched, written about or understood. Furthermore, as I widened the scope of the literature I reviewed, and as I reflected on my reading, it became clear that I needed to explore my topic from numerous perspectives, if I was to address my research question in a meaningful way.

I decided the aims of my research would be best served by using a case study approach (Ball, 1981; Fuller, Hodkinson, H., Hodkinson, P., and Unwin, 2005; Simons, 2009; Yin, 2014), which I discuss in the following section. Furthermore, I undertook a workplace ethnography (Brockmann, 2011; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; McCann, Granter, Hyde and Hassard, 2013) to investigate the learning culture experienced by the LSA workforce, by exploring the “events, language, rituals, institutions, behaviors, artefacts, and interactions” (Cunliffe, 2010, page 227) within my case study setting. Later in this chapter I talk about the reasons for adopting an ethnographic approach to my research, the ethical dilemmas this raised, including those that arose because of the multiple roles I had at the school (Lavis, 2010; Unluer, 2012).
I will explain my data collection methods and how I ensured the associated ethical requirements were appropriately addressed. I will describe how I analysed my findings using thematic analysis, which I approached in two ways. Firstly, I analysed the data in a deductive, or theoretical, way so I could map my findings onto the WALF (Felstead, et al., 2009), but I also reflected on the data from an inductive perspective as I wanted to enable additional themes to emerge from my data (Simons, 2009). I demonstrate how I was aware of the need for reflexivity throughout this study and how researchers’ “positions and personalities affect all stages of the research process” (Simons, 2009; Whiteley, 2012), particularly in light of the interpretive nature of my study.

3.2 Case study research

As I have already noted, providing learning opportunities for LSAs is far from straightforward, given the diversity of complex demands placed on senior managers and staff. In addition, scant attention has been paid to this subject in the literature and among educators, especially in relation to those who work in special educational environments. As a result, I had little extant research on which to draw when planning and designing my study and this was one of the reasons I looked at using a single case. However, more influential in my decision to explore my research question within a single school was because I wanted to use a methodology, which enabled me to explore complex interactions because of my application of the WALF’s (Felstead, et al., 2009) analytical framework, “to excavate the relationship between working and learning more deeply and across a much larger canvas” (ibid, page 197).

By undertaking research at Willowbank school (known as ‘Willowbank’ throughout this thesis), I wanted to provide a rich depiction of one specific educational setting and by doing so contribute to, and extend, understanding of the subject. Furthermore, through detailed exploration of my single case I hoped to be able to extrapolate my findings to other educational settings. As Yin (2014) and Robson (2011) point out, case study is a research strategy “rather than a method, such as observation” (Robson, 2011, page 136), which uses “multiple methods of evidence or data collection” (ibid). Simons’ comment about case study research is also helpful:
The primary purpose is to generate in-depth understanding of a specific topic, programme, policy, institution or system to generate knowledge and/or inform policy development, professional practice and civil or community action

(Simons, 2009, page 21)

Whilst I have addressed why I wanted to use a single case study, the reason for the specific case I chose requires explanation. I was keen to carry out my research at Willowbank because I already had an extensive insight into the structure and organisation of the school (Barbour, 2010), I understood the organisational vernacular used by staff, the workings of the school and the layout of the building; all of which helped me in the planning and the conduct of my research (Unluer, 2012). The reason for my familiarity with the school was because I had worked there in a voluntary capacity for two days, every week, for three years until 2012 and when I ended my time as a volunteer (to become a volunteer at another special school), I became a governor at Willowbank (a role I still have). The school also participated in my Masters study during which time I spent a considerable amount of time there. The point about my Masters is also pertinent because I wanted to return to the site of that earlier research, since it was this venture that generated my deeper interest in exploring the wider considerations of learning and development provision for LSAs.

3.3 My case: Willowbank special school

I go into detail about Willowbank in the next chapter, when I contemplate the school in terms of a productive system and therefore I only provide an overview of the school at this stage.

Willowbank is a special school that supports the education of children and young people with very complex learning disabilities. At the time of my research there were forty-seven pupils, aged between three and eighteen years, on the school roll (the maximum number of pupils the school can admit is fifty and this is determined by the available space in the school building). Willowbank is a non-maintained school because it is part of the Cedars Trust charitable organisation, but without exception pupils’ fees are paid by local authorities (from a wide geographical area), because
these authorities are unable to provide the appropriate level of specialist educational support by other means. Approximately half of the pupils are residential and live in purpose built houses on the same site as the school. Depending on their circumstances pupils can board weekly or termly, and a minority of students have a 52-week residential placement. Willowbank received ‘Outstanding’ judgements from Ofsted in 2009 and 2012.

3.3.1 The school staff

The students at Willowbank require a substantial amount of support as can be seen by the number, and type, of staff the school employs. Along with the Headteacher and Deputy Head, the school employs eleven teachers (two are a job-share), sixty Learning Support Assistants (LSAs), a speech and language therapist (SALT), an occupational therapist (OT), a physiotherapist, a therapy technician (who works with the OT and physiotherapist), two audiologists and an assistive technologist (who identifies, and modifies, devices to help pupils develop communication skills, such as adapted ipads and interactive communication boards). The school also employs a full-time art therapist, a part-time music therapist and a part-time musician. As is common in the education and care sectors, the majority of staff are female, indeed only three LSAs are male, along with the therapy technician. The youngest LSA is eighteen years old and the oldest is fifty-eight.

3.4 Ethnography

Having explained my rationale for focusing on one specific case in section 3.2, I now turn to the reasons I decided to do an ethnographic study (Brockmann, 2011; Jacobsen, 2014; Van Maanen, 2011). Watson’s (2012) description of organisational ethnography provided a helpful starting point as I considered and planned my research:
A particularly helpful way of defining ethnography is as a genre of social science writing which draws upon the writer’s close observation of and involvement with people in a particular social setting and relates to the words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred

(Watson, 2012, page 16)

Ethnography in organisational research has a long history, whereby researchers have provided in-depth accounts of workplaces and individuals’ experiences of work (and lack of work) across numerous settings, which could not have been accessed through less immersive techniques. The work of the Chicago School of Anthropology in the early twentieth century and the workplace ethnographies of the Manchester School in the mid twentieth century are often cited as seminal for this genre of research endeavour. Looking back at the history of workplace ethnography, Zickar and Carter (2010) highlight that ethnographic researchers managed to capture such immensely detailed perspectives because of the extended periods of time they spent with the workers they were studying. For example:

[L]iving among them, working alongside the people they were observing, and even spending time with workers in their homes, taverns and churches. These intensive observational studies were useful for grounding researchers with a sense of reality of the workplace, instead of treating workers as abstract entities like many economists did

(Zickar and Carter, 2010, page 304)

However, as the twentieth century progressed a more positivist stance was taken towards organisational research, and academic work of an ethnographic nature went into decline (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). There was also the appeal that more positivistic approaches required researchers to be away from their institutions for shorter periods of time, surveys (for example) were more straightforward to administer and the research costs were lower. However, in the last few years, organisational ethnography has experienced somewhat of a resurgence (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; McCann, Granter, Hyde and Hassard, 2013), since
“ethnographic studies, by their nature, are more likely to be sensitive to important contextual and cultural variables” (Zickar and Carter, 2010, page 312). And I was keen for my research to be a part of this revival.

Moreover, I wanted to use ethnography not only because this approach requires the researcher to become involved in the life of the organisation they are studying and to analyse findings as holistically as possible, but because of the way in which the research findings are conveyed to the reader. What appealed to me is that the authors in their ethnographic accounts bring the situations they describe to life, enabling the reader to vicariously experience the setting and the actors within it. I was particularly influenced by the writing of authors such as Massimiliano Mollona (2009) and John Van Maanen (2011). For example, in ‘Made in Sheffield: An ethnography of Industrial Work and Politics’, Mollona illuminated the experiences of Sheffield steelworkers and the “impact of economic theories and managerial ideologies on peoples’ livelihood” (Mollona, 2009, page 1). As one reviewer noted “full appreciation of the writer’s arguments requires an advanced knowledge of political and economic anthropology” (Atkinson, 2010, page 139), and these are not areas to which I can claim to have detailed knowledge, but I was captivated by the way his writing brought the shop floor to life, and through his narration I was drawn into the factories and the experiences of the mill workers:

*The rolling mill is located at the far right-hand side of the smelting shop. Every morning the wind blowing from the furnace covers the mill with ash, aluminium and black soot. Every morning Toby wipes the mill, chops off the extremities of the billets with a ten-kilo hammer and helps Alan to load them into the gas-fired furnace. At the end of the long furnace, a heavy door opens automatically, pushing out the heated ingot*

(Mollona, 2009, page 115)

Having read richly descriptive ethnographies, such as those in Mollona’s ‘Made in Sheffield’ (2009), I decided to provide a vignette at the beginning of each of my findings chapters. The purpose of each vignette was to weave together the wealth of data I had collected into one overarching narrative. I then go on in the findings chapters to take apart this narrative to examine the constituent elements.
Ethnography also has an important role to play in the field of education, for example recent educational ethnographies include the study of children’s rights and religious education in church schools (Hemming, 2017), and sensory ethnography for children with impaired vision (Morris, 2017). In fact, educational ethnography has been used in educational research for many decades. For example, Colin Lacey’s “Hightown Grammar” study of a grammar school for boys in northern England, where his objective was “to provide a picture of the stratification and subsequent sub-culture development, associated with academic streaming” (1966, page 245). From this detailed ethnography of one school, Lacey went on to illuminate the wider problem of the lack of academic success of working class pupils at grammar schools. The ethnography of Stephen Ball, and his account of his fieldwork in a secondary school over the course of three years, was published in “Beachside Comprehensive” (1981). In the book, he explores the:

**[P]rocesses of comprehensive schooling; that is to say, I am concerned with the dynamics of selection, socialization and change within the school as these processes are experienced and dealt with by the pupils and their teachers**

(Ball, 1981, page xv)

The outcome of his extensive study provided an in-depth account of a secondary school that was undergoing significant transformation, following the introduction of the comprehensive educational system in England. In his study, Ball examined his research area from a wide-ranging perspective and this was the approach I wanted to adopt in my own ethnography, using the WALF to assist me with this aim. Moreover, ethnographers, such as Ball (1981), illustrated the gap between the intentions of policy makers and the reality as it was experienced in schools, and this was something that I wanted to explore in my own ethnography. What is more, I set out to examine the extent to which the reality of workforce development at Willowbank matched the rhetoric, given the complexity of demands placed on the special school system.

I also realised that in the course of reading the ethnographical literature I have not, as yet, found any ethnographies that have explored the workplace learning experiences of LSAs in a special school context. Indeed, I have only located one other
ethnography that describes the experiences of staff in a special school and this was a study by Tan and Eyal (2015) at an autism-only therapy school. Relating their work to medical sociology literature, these researchers explored the psychological approaches used by instructors to cope with the unpredictability of working with a highly specific therapeutic model in place at the school. In the limited literature on the subject, other ethnographies that have studied special education have taken place in inclusive educational settings (for example, Brown, 2009; Evans, 2002; Gaffney, 2014).

3.5 Ethnography, ethics and integrity

Ethnographic researchers are faced with numerous ethical challenges and it is to that topic I now turn. But firstly, I explain the conditions that had to be fulfilled to satisfy the University of Manchester’s ethical standards and those of Willowbank and Cedars Trust. Following this, I reflect on the ethical considerations that arose because of my choice to carry out an ethnography.

3.5.1 University requirements

My study was conducted in accordance with the University of Manchester’s research ethics standards. These standards required that I demonstrated the transparency of the methods I used and showed a clear understanding of the necessity to uphold the rights of the individual and that I would maintain the dignity of everyone involved in the research. The topic of my study was not of a sensitive nature and at no point were individuals asked to reveal information of a personal, or potentially upsetting, nature. All participants in this research were able to assess for themselves if they wanted to take part. In addition, I reiterated to every interviewee that they could change their mind about being interviewed at any time and that staff could ask me to stop observing their activities in classrooms, in meetings or around school, without the need to give me a reason. In fact, no one changed their mind about being interviewed, nor was I asked to stop observing any activities. Whilst my research took place in a special school all of my dealings were with members of staff and this study did not require me to interact with any of the students, nor did it require the involvement of any pupil. During my non-participant observations, I observed the activities from the periphery.
3.5.2 Permission from my research organisation

I obtained permission from the Headteacher of Willowbank (Appendix A) prior to the collection of any information connected to this study. I was also required to present my research proposal to the Research Committee at Cedars Trust, (which comprised of representatives from the Human Resources department, the Oak Specialist College, the Chief Executive’s office and the Deputy Head of Willowbank), because the school was part of this larger organisation. In order to be on school premises, I required an Enhanced Certificate from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) and I was able to confirm to the committee that I had this documentation. I confirmed that all of my data would be anonymised. I was given permission to take photographs and I confirmed that they would not include any of the students and that no student would be able to be identified from any of the images (for example names on school bags and on wall displays). This group endorsed the Headteacher’s permission immediately following my presentation. I have confirmed I will provide a report of my research findings to the staff at the school and the Research Committee at Cedars Trust.

3.5.3 Ethnography and ethical challenges

My completion of the necessary University, Willowbank and Cedars Trust processes enabled me to commence my research. In spite of this, and not demurring in any way from the importance of the intent behind the completion of these bureaucratic procedures, it became apparent early on in my research that I would have to navigate my way through the ethical problems associated with ethnographic research. As Calvey comments: “One of the issues here is what I refer to as the ‘consent to what problem’, in that social research is often contingent and all probabilities cannot be covered by the consent form” (2008, page 907).

My initial - and somewhat naïve - view was that since I had been clear at the meeting when I told all school staff about my research, then it followed that all of the workforce would remember my presence at school meant I was gathering data for my study. Clearly this was not the case, since everyone at Willowbank had rather more pressing and important concerns than noting that a researcher was in their midst! This was not a problem when I was carrying out interviews, as the context
was unambiguous. The situation was also straightforwardly addressed when I sat in on meetings, either as a participant or non-participant observer. At these times, I reminded staff of my reasons for being in the room, ensured I had obtained the appropriate consents and asked everyone if I could record the discussion (which people always agreed to). And consequently, by the time I had completed my fieldwork the majority staff at Willowbank had been reminded of my research and given their permission for my activities numerous times.

3.5.4 Discussions in social spaces

Those staff who were less involved in the study (for example, who were not interviewed or who were not in the class meetings I observed) had heard about my research at the all-school meeting. However, there were times when I signalled my presence when staff walked into the space I was observing and they nodded their agreement for me to remain. Occasionally, I was in a class meeting or observing around school and I was aware an agency member of staff was present. When this happened, I attempted to inform them about my research and obtain their consent, but on two occasions they provided verbal consent because their work could not be interrupted.

The more problematic situations arose in informal situations, particularly when I was sitting in the staff social areas having lunch or a coffee break, chatting to LSAs and teachers because they knew me, rather than in my role as researcher. And, of course, there were many times when the conversations were unrelated to my research. However, there were occasions when issues were discussed that were of potential relevance to my study and at such times I was listening to conversations and relating them to my research, but the members of staff had no reason to think that this was what I was doing. While I could not ‘un-know’ the subject of these conversations, how I dealt with them as potential sources of data varied depending on what had been said. As Goodwin, Pope, Mort and Smith (2003) noted, “ethical conduct is not fixed, but is personally, socially, and contextually constructed” (page 569). Sometimes the discussion was of a sensitive nature, or the anonymity of those being discussed could not be guaranteed, and I made a decision not to use the content of these discussions in my analysis. Occasionally I followed up the comments with the person later, asking if I could include the information, or I raised it with the person if
they were an interviewee. At other times, I would join in the conversation telling the group that I was interested in their views because of my research and the discussions that followed indicated that the staff were interested in what I was doing and keen to have their views heard. Clearly my decisions on occasions such as these shaped the data I used in this dissertation and another researcher may well have made other choices. For example, someone else may have included all of the data they heard whilst sitting with the staff during breaks, even if those present had no knowledge of the use that would be made of their conversations.

3.5.5 Anonymity of participants

I have been careful not to identify the geographical location of Willowbank school and in articles and presentations there is very little likelihood that the school or any of the staff could be identified by audiences outside the locale of Cedars Trust. I also carefully selected which external photographs I used, so that the school and the surrounding buildings are not identifiable. However, there were challenges when I came to writing this thesis and ensuring the anonymity of participants, because a small number of staff at the school will be identifiable because of the roles they have at the school, despite my use of pseudonyms. The Headteacher and Deputy Head are, of course, the most obvious people in this regard. There are several other members of staff who could also be identified because of the specific roles they had at the school, for example the senior teachers and the LSA subject ‘champions’. These individuals had a key part to play in influencing the learning and development of their colleagues and therefore their views are of considerable importance to the research question considered in this dissertation. Where it was possible for some of these participants I have omitted non-essential details in an attempt to maintain their anonymity.

This then takes me to the disquiet I felt when I was analysing my data and where examples emerged from conversations with staff and my observations, which show some individuals at the school in an unfavourable light. I reflected on these occurrences, but the instances I have used in this dissertation were not from isolated comments and it would have resulted in a thesis that lacked integrity if I had downplayed or discounted this information. However, this does not lessen the discomfort I feel since all the members of staff at the school were highly supportive
of my study and I have known many of the staff for a number of years. Someone who had had less involvement at the school may have felt differently.

3.5.6 My multiple roles at Willowbank

My interpretation of events and conversations at Willowbank will have been shaped by the multiple roles (Hill, 2006; Unluer, 2012) I have had at the school and will have had an impact on the research and my part in it. I know and am known by many of the people who work there, but I am more familiar with the views of some than others, because of the context in which I have worked with them. For example, I am familiar with the LSAs who I worked with as a volunteer, and they know me on a more personal level than the members of staff who have worked with me in my capacity as a governor (when my visits to the school may have been construed as more formal). Some of the people who participated in my MSc research only knew me through that undertaking, and it was heartening for me that many of those who were still at the school came forward to participate in this doctoral research.

There were two aspects that I needed to consider regarding my different roles at the school. Firstly, my own behaviour and that of the participants during the interviews; for example, the atmosphere during discussions with staff who had known me for some time was more relaxed from the outset than with those who did not know me (Lavis, 2010). Whilst I made efforts to make the interviews as relaxed as possible, there were some who I suspect found the situation somewhat unnerving. I also reflected on the effect my different roles might have when I was observing activities around school or sitting in meetings, particularly in light of my position as a governor, which could have been seen as one of authority and surveillance (Hobbs and Kubanyiova, 2008). However, although I was very mindful of this, I did not witness anything to suggest that the staff at the school saw my various roles as problematic, or changed their behaviour as a result. What is more, given my habitual presence around Willowbank I soon noted that my being around the school was rarely remarked upon. Indeed, the impression I formed from what was said to me in the staffroom, was that staff viewed the level of involvement I had with Willowbank and Cedars Trust as beneficial, since my level of understanding and insight was unusual for a member of the governing body.
I acquired the additional roles of trainer and facilitator during the course of my fieldwork. These developments took place after I had planned my research (but prior to any interviews with staff) and as a result of discussions at a governors’ meeting. I was asked to provide training to teachers on classroom organisation, deployment of staff and time management, a request based on my previous career as a line and project manager. I agreed to undertake this training and given the relevance to my research I requested, and was given, permission from the school and participants to use the information from these meetings in my research. In the April of my fieldwork I delivered the training to all of the teachers. Because of my role as trainer in this meeting I entered into discussions with the teachers and therefore my active participation shaped the nature of the information generated at that time.

The Deputy Head asked me to facilitate a related meeting in May, when the Headteacher, Deputy Head and the three senior teachers discussed the clarification of roles and responsibilities of the workforce at the school, and the implementation of the new performance management process. This meeting was initiated by the Deputy Head in advance of her promotion to Headteacher the following September. The information that emerged during both of these meetings was extremely valuable in helping me to address my research question. For example, the extensive discussion between the participants provided a detailed insight into how the teachers organised and managed the work of their LSAs, and the ways in which their stance influenced how they approached the learning and development of the paraeducators. Whilst I acted as a facilitator at this meeting and so was mindful of enabling the meeting attendees’ views to be at the forefront, how and when I chose to interject will have had a bearing on the outcome of the discussions and the data I subsequently analysed.

Finally, but importantly, because of my longstanding relationship with the school I had been privy to staffroom gossip over the years, which gave me an insight into the views of LSAs and teachers. However, from an ethical perspective I was not comfortable with including this information in my thesis. Nevertheless, this knowledge influenced my views on certain aspects of the school and individuals within Cedars Trust. I have also witnessed, outside of my research endeavours, how different members of staff interact with each other and their attitude to the work they
These experiences brought a deeper understanding to my research, but will also have influenced how I approached my fieldwork and analysed my data. As a result of all of these considerations I spent a substantial amount of time reflecting on my representation of the views of staff and the situation at the school because of the additional knowledge I had. Unluer (2012) makes a valid point in this regard:

**Educational research is concerned with human beings and their behaviour involving a great number of players, each of whom brings to the research process a wide range of perspectives, including the researcher’s own**

(Unluer, 2012, page 2)

Because of these considerations, I was mindful of the need for ongoing reflection during the study (Robson, 2011) and I audio recorded my thoughts and reflections throughout my fieldwork, as I analysed my data (Flick, 1998) and in the writing of this thesis.

In order to help with the process of reflection, I met a member of my former MSc cohort during the course of my research to help me reflect on how I was managing the research process, approaching my data analysis and to act as a ‘sounding board’. This individual knew Cedars Trust and is an active and knowledgeable member of the SEND community, so was aware of the numerous issues that related to the area of my research. This individual acted as my ‘critical friend’ (Nilsson, 2013), in confidence (and with no one at the organisation identified). Wright and Adam (2015) discuss the role of critical friends in the development of teacher practice (teachers are the “learners” in the quote below), but their words are equally relevant to my situation as a researcher:

**Learners in this partnership receive feedback and allow their critical friend to raise questions and judgments about their professional practice so that they can reflect on their actions and thinking**

(Wright and Adam, 2015, page 442)
3.6 Data collection

Once I had been given the necessary permissions, I attended an all-school meeting to tell staff about my research and at this time I let them know that as part of my study I would be moving around the school and observing the day-to-day activities. I was careful to convey that my observations would not be to assess the practice of LSAs or teachers - given the anxiety around monitoring inspections, such as those undertaken by Ofsted - but because I wanted to gain as much of an insight as possible into the learning environment for LSAs at the school. Following my talk to staff, I handed out a summary of my research (Appendix B) to attendees as they left the meeting, and I noted the contact details of those who immediately volunteered to be interviewed. I subsequently visited Willowbank for several days over the following two weeks to ask if additional members of staff would agree to be interviewed. The role of therapists was potentially important in helping LSAs to develop their knowledge, and therefore I approached this group - and others who had a non-teaching role (such as the assistive technologist) - about being interviewed. As a result, I managed to interview twenty-five employees, who represented a cross section of staff at Willowbank.

At the start of the interviews I gave verbal information about the study, as well as providing a Participant Information Sheet and consent form for interviewees to read (see Appendix C for LSA and teacher, and Appendix D for therapist). All interviewees were offered the opportunity to ask any questions about the study prior to signing a consent form and before the interview started. They were also reminded verbally that they could stop the interview at any time. When my fieldwork began, I also provided an information sheet and consent form for staff whose classrooms I planned to observe (Appendix E). In my conversations with these staff I emphasised they could ask me to stop observing at any time without the need to provide a reason; they also signed a consent form.

I kept all consent forms and documentation that could identify participants in a place to which only I had access and I allocated every participant a study identifier that was used on all documentation instead of names. I told participants that all data would be anonymised and that I would maintain the confidentiality of everyone
involved in the study. All of the names used in this thesis are pseudonyms. I also
guaranteed that all participant information will be disposed of in a way that
maintained their confidentiality (that is, documentation shredded and digital
recordings deleted).

Table 1, on pages 78 and 79, summarises the data I collected during my fieldwork.
From the information in the table it can be seen that I accumulated a large quantity of
material from numerous sources.
Table 1: Fieldwork activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Organisational documentation</th>
<th>Semi-structured Interviews</th>
<th>Meetings and participant observations</th>
<th>Non-participant observations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>- School Ofsted report</td>
<td>- Headteacher and Deputy Head to confirm research proposal and activities</td>
<td>- All school meeting to present research proposal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Draft School Improvement and Development Action Plan</td>
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<td>- School Self-Evaluation Statement</td>
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<td>- LSA job descriptions</td>
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<td>- Teacher job/post descriptions and Standards for Teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Meetings:</td>
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<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>- Comms book (reviewed each time visited school)</td>
<td>- Headteacher</td>
<td>- Reception area (start of school day)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Cedars Trust Strategic priorities</td>
<td>- Deputy Head</td>
<td>- Reception area (after lunchtime)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- School website</td>
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<td>- Staff room (morning breaks and lunchtimes)</td>
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<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>- Minutes of school Management Team meetings x 2</td>
<td>- Teachers x 8 LSAs x 2 Occupational Therapist Assistive Technologist (former LSA)</td>
<td>- Class A before pupils arrive and morning greeting with pupils</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Comms book (reviewed each time visited school)</td>
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<td>- Class A group session</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meeting:</td>
<td>- Staff rooms (morning breaks and lunchtimes)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Member of Human Resources department to discuss content of ‘Boost’ training</td>
<td>- Teachers meeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participant observation</td>
<td>- School corridors/pupil dining area/reception area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>- Copy of ‘Boost’ Training session plan (HR)</td>
<td>- LSA Clinical Therapy Specialist Senior Audiologist</td>
<td>- Staff dining room (lunchtimes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Current Performance Management documentation in place at school</td>
<td></td>
<td>- World Autism Day activities (staff room)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Comms book (reviewed each time visited school)</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Friday afternoon all staff ‘WOW’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.6.1 Organisational documentation

The Deputy Head at Willowbank provided me with copies of various organisational documents at the outset of my fieldwork. I was aware of many details regarding the management of the school in my capacity of governor, but I had not previously had cause to review certain documents, such as job descriptions for teachers and LSAs. I
examined the extent to which these descriptions explicitly referred to learning and development, firstly in relation to how the individual is expected to approach their own learning needs and secondly, how they were expected to contribute to the learning of others. Having background material such as this from the outset was important, because I could explore the experiences as related by the interviewees with the information set out in the job descriptions. Furthermore, during my observations I could compare how the rhetoric of the job descriptions met the reality of the learning and development activities at the school.

Other organisational documentation, such as the communication on the newly introduced Cedars Trust Strategic Priorities, enabled me to investigate whether the Headteacher and Deputy Head had to revise their learning and development strategy at the school, since it was the strategic priorities of Cedars Trust that dictated the strategic priorities at Willowbank. It was also important for me to explore the effects any such changes had on the learning opportunities available to staff.

The School Improvement and Development Action Plan evolved during my fieldwork, and as the school year progressed this document had to incorporate the plans set in place to deliver the strategic priorities of the school. The introduction of teachers as line managers was a notable change during this time and was something that had the potential to influence the learning culture at the school significantly.

3.6.2 Semi-structured interviews

At the start of the interview, but after the interviewees had signed their consent form, they were asked to complete a form that captured demographic details (Appendix F LSA details, Appendix G teacher details), such as their age and gender (which they could have left blank, but which all individuals completed), the number of years they had worked at Willowbank and any qualifications they had.

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data to gain as detailed an understanding as possible of the views of the interviewees, and so that they could expand on any areas of importance to them during the interview (Kvale, 1996; Smith, 2004). This also allowed for follow-up questions during the discussion. It is worth commenting that an unstructured interview (Robson, 2011) was not
considered appropriate for this study, because I wanted to restrict the discussion to the particular area being explored. I used topics I had identified in the literature and during my MSc research, to shape the interview schedule. Please see Appendix H for prompts used with LSAs, Appendix I for those used with teachers, and Appendix J for prompts used with the Headteacher and the Deputy Head. I did not have prompt questions for the therapists, but I began the interviews by asking how much involvement they had in training LSAs, how often they worked with them and to explore their views on the opportunities LSAs had for training at the school. I gave sufficient thought to the interview questions to avoid overlooking areas of potential significance by framing questions too narrowly, or by asking questions in such a way that they merely served to reinforce any predetermined views I may have had (Lewis, 2009). In order to capture any additional views, which may not have surfaced during the course of the interview, I finished the interview by asking ‘is there anything else you would like to add that we haven’t covered?’. By doing this I hoped to allow for the emergence of ‘rich’ and personal accounts (Banjeree and Pawley, 2011).

One criticism levelled at the use of interviews is that interviewees may not always tell the truth, either for intentional or unintentional reasons (Weiner-Levy and Popper-Giveon, 2011). Whilst I did not know all of the interviewees, I had no reason to believe that any of them would have reason to be deceptive, and I did not observe any behaviours that suggested deliberate untruths. However, there were instances where what people told me was not mirrored in their behaviour (providing support for my ethnographical approach). I do not believe this was intentional, but because participants were unaware that their behaviour was contradictory. These occurrences are discussed in my findings chapters.

At the outset of my fieldwork I had intended to interview the teachers and LSAs at two time points during the school year. Initially I had thought I would explore if the training I had done with the teachers had influenced how they worked with their teams and to ask if they had any further comments about the learning environment at the school. However, as the months progressed it became clear that I would not be able to interview the teachers or LSAs a second time, firstly, because I was already fully occupied transcribing and analysing the data I had already gathered. Secondly,
it was also apparent that staff at Willowbank had very little time available and I did not think it was appropriate to request any more of their time, when they had already been supportive of my research.

Table 2, overleaf, provides details on the twenty-five interviewees.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee number</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>Years at Willowbank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I1</td>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Headteacher</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2</td>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Deputy Head</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I3</td>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Senior teacher</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I4</td>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I5</td>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I6</td>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I7</td>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>&lt;2 (left a month after her interview)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I8</td>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Senior teacher</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I9</td>
<td>Collette</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Assistive Technologist (and former LSA)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I10</td>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I11</td>
<td>Cerys</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Senior teacher</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I12</td>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Senior LSA</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I13</td>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Level 3 LSA</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I14</td>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Occupational Therapist</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I15</td>
<td>Fleur</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>LSA</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I16</td>
<td>James</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Therapy Technician</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I17</td>
<td>Gilly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Senior audiologist</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I18</td>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>LSA</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I19</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Level 3 LSA (autism champion)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I20</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>LSA</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I21</td>
<td>Pip</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Level 3 LSA (hearing impairment champion)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I22</td>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Senior LSA</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I23</td>
<td>Carolyn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>LSA</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I24</td>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Level 3 LSA (Habilitation specialist)</td>
<td>~10 (not continuous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I25</td>
<td>Hattie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>LSA</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen from Table Two a total of twenty-five staff were interviewed, the shortest interview lasted twenty minutes and the longest lasted an hour and ten minutes. The majority of interviews lasted between forty minutes and an hour. All of the interviews took place in school (with no other staff present) and most occurred when pupils had left school for the day. As well as the Headteacher and Deputy Head, eight teachers and eleven LSAs participated the interviews. In addition, I interviewed the Assistive Technologist (a former LSA), two of the therapy staff and the senior audiologist.

The age range of interviewees was twenty-two to fifty-nine years; age was not indicative of how long they had been employed at the school. Interviewees’ time at Willowbank ranged from less than one year to the Headteacher who had been at the school for twenty-six years (she had had other teaching roles at the school during that time and had been Headteacher for approximately ten years). Only one of the interviewees was male (the therapy technician); this reflected the gendered nature of the workforce at the school (as is the case in the education sector more widely). Out of an educational staff of eighty-three (including therapists) only four of the staff at Willowbank were male, and these were the therapy technician and three of the LSAs. Despite asking the male LSAs to participate in interviews none of them came forward, although all of them were happy to be observed when I was in their classrooms and observing around school.

3.6.3 Meetings

My meeting with the Headteacher and Deputy Head in January was arranged so that these senior managers could provide me with background information about the training provision at the school and for me to share my research aims and my planned research timetable. We discussed the practicalities of me being in school and clarified any points, for example, I confirmed that any photographs I took would not identify pupils or members of staff. I was given extensive freedom around the school, because I had established a trusted relationship with staff over many years. The Headteacher and Deputy Head were supportive of my research and did not impede my fieldwork in any way, because they were keen to receive feedback as to how LSA learning provision at Willowbank could be improved. I did not analyse the information from this meeting. However, the Headteacher and Deputy Head also
spoke to me as interviewees the following month, and this data was analysed in the same way as that of the other interviewees.

My meeting with a member of the Human Resources department was arranged to provide me with information about the Trust-wide managerial course, known as ‘Boost’, in advance of the teacher training I delivered. As only a handful of teachers had been on the course at that time I was hoping that they would also share their experiences during my training with the rest of their colleagues. At the meeting, I had with the individual from Human Resources, I noted that she had found the teachers to be less forthcoming during the course than managers from other departments. This comment was brought to mind as my fieldwork progressed and the relationship between Willowbank school and the Human Resources Department was brought into sharp focus; this relationship forms part of my discussion in chapter seven.

3.6.4 Participant observations

When I was in the role of participant observer, I was both an active member of the group as well as being a researcher, and therefore at these times I was in a position to influence aspects of my research. Everyone involved in the meetings was aware that I was attending in these two roles. I digitally recorded (with permission) the meetings since I was unable to be an active attendee and also take written notes. I transcribed these recordings, not only to analyse the themes that emerged, but also to note the way in which information was discussed (for example, some comments were made with irritation, others with humour) and to reflect on my own contributions. Tope, Chamberlain, Crowley, Hodson (2005) comment that participant observation “has the capacity to generate rich description because the researcher has the greater potential to understand subtle nuances through firsthand experience” (page 473).

3.6.5 Non-participant observations

I carried out non-participant observations in different locations and settings around the school, writing notes and taking photographs. Van Maanen (2011), a champion of ethnography, summarises the benefit of using this approach:
Detailed renderings of objects, actors, events, language and interactions open a window onto some of the everyday processes of organizational actors’ meaning making

(Van Maanen, 2011, page 1)

The length of time I observed activities depended on the situations and circumstances around Willowbank. For example, I had to curtail one of my corridor observations when a pupil entered the space in an agitated state (accompanied by two LSAs) and it would have been inappropriate for me to remain where he could see me, as this would have increased his anxiety. At other times, I could position myself in areas around the school for significant lengths of time with the pupils and staff moving across the spaces I was observing. The observations I made during class meetings lasted between thirty minutes and forty-five minutes, and teachers’ meetings lasted approximately an hour. My observations of staff in their classrooms before and after pupils were in school lasted between ten and thirty minutes. Having been a volunteer at the school I was familiar with the appropriate clothing to wear and therefore blended into the surroundings (unlike visitors to the school who often appear in suits and look very much out of place).

3.7 Data analysis

3.7.1 The need for reflection

Prior to discussing how I analysed the data I collected, I need to acknowledge that I approached this study from an interpretive perspective, and the viewpoint that social reality is “a constructed world built in and through meaningful interpretations” (Prasad, A. and Prasad, P., 2002, page 6). In this way, I set out to uncover the meanings the staff at Willowbank assigned to their workplace learning experiences. From this interpretative standpoint and belief that knowledge is socially constructed, it was not only the research participants who would bring their own narratives, beliefs and experiences to bear on situations (Guest, Namey and Mitchell, 2013) since this observation also applied to me as the researcher, because the data that emerged was subject to my own experiences and perceptions (Beckett and Clegg, 2007). For example, given the subject of this dissertation, it is clear that I place a lot
of importance on self-development and yet there many people who do not have this same outlook, including some of the staff at Willowbank.

3.7.2 Organisational documentation

My purpose in reading the various Willowbank and Trust documents was to gain an understanding of the learning culture at the school. I wanted to examine aspects such as the relevance placed on coaching and training skills in job descriptions and school documents (such as the school’s Self Evaluation and Improvement Plan), as well as the type of information that was provided on the school’s website. By reviewing this documentation, I gained an insight into the learning and development culture at Willowbank and it also provided information on the wider context in which the school operated (Simons, 2009). I did not carry out a thematic analysis on this documentation, but I provide an example of how I used this information in Box 1 below. The example refers to the ‘Teacher’s Post’ document and shows how I have noted the contradiction between the organisational expectations of teachers and the reality of the workplace relationship they had with their LSAs.

**Box 1: Comparison of organisational information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher’s responsibilities and duties in ‘Teacher’s Post’ document</th>
<th>Training session for teachers: Examples of comments from attendees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To advise and co-operate with the Senior Managers, other teachers and support staff on the preparation of programmes of study, teaching materials, methods of teaching and assessment and pastoral care</td>
<td>“Sometimes we’re just not supernumerate, therefore it’s more difficult to model what you want the child to learn - it’s also difficult to oversee how your team are” (I10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“But I know how I like things done and sometimes it’s just easier to do it yourself” (Rosie)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.7.3 Semi-structured interviews

Prior to every interview, I allocated an interviewee number (and so, as there were twenty-five interviewees the numbers were I1 – I25). When I wrote this thesis I subsequently assigned pseudonyms to the interviewee numbers and to any other individuals mentioned in this dissertation. I transcribed the digitally recorded interviews into Word documents and for many of the interviews I did this verbatim.
However, owing to the volume of data I collected as my fieldwork progressed, and the limited time I had at my disposal, in later instances I précised some of the interviewees’ comments if they were not germane to the subject being discussed. I also noted, using the comment facility in Word, any additional observations that would not be apparent from reading the text alone, such as pauses and sarcasm. I listened to every recording at least twice, and I listened to some portions of interviews numerous times to check my understanding, and to ensure I had not mis-typed comments or misinterpreted what had been said. I made a note of any instances where I was unsure of the interviewee’s meaning, or where I needed clarification, and followed this up with the individual when I was next in school. Owing to my frequent presence at Willowbank this usually happened within a week of the interview.

3.7.3.1 Thematic analysis of the interview data

I identified themes from my interview data using thematic analysis, which is a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, page 4); I approached my thematic analysis in two ways. The first was using an inductive approach (“bottom up”, Braun and Clarke, 2006, page 8), meaning that this part of my analysis was data driven, and my second approach to analysing my data was deductive, or theoretical (“top down”, ibid) because I also intended to map my data onto the WALF (Felstead, et al, 2009). Watson develops this point:

\[T\]he investigator works iteratively, switching back and forth ... between the inductive and the deductive ... Theory is thus both a resource for guiding fieldwork and an outcome of the thinking process which is stimulated by the interplay in the researcher’s mind of theory and field experience

(Watson, 2012, page 19)

I was familiar with Braun and Clarke’s summary of the phases of undertaking thematic analysis and found it very helpful for this activity, and I reproduce their summary in Table 3 overleaf.
Table 3: Phases of thematic analysis

From Braun and Clarke (2006, page 87)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description of the process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Familiarizing yourself with your data</td>
<td>Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Generating initial codes</td>
<td>Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Searching for themes</td>
<td>Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reviewing themes</td>
<td>Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Defining and naming themes</td>
<td>Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Producing the report</td>
<td>The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the beginning of my analysis, I identified my preliminary codes. Boyatzis’ (1998) useful definition is often cited in the literature, stating that codes refer to “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, page 63, cited in Robson, 2011, page 478). In Example 1 overleaf, I attempt to illustrate how I coded three extracts from an interview I had with a teacher (I4), although this has proved quite difficult, because in reality all of the coding was done by highlighting the relevant extracts on the transcriptions and copying and pasting them to electronic folders I created in Word on my computer. Consequently, I had numerous folders, each containing excerpts from interviews that I had assigned to the same code (e.g. ‘Resourcing’).
**Example 1: Generating initial codes**

I4: Before Christmas [interview date 12th March] I think I wasn’t supernumerate [sic] … for pretty much the whole of December I wasn’t supernumerate … [CODE: SUPERNUMERATE]

TM: Because?

I4: Just because there were staff shortages, so they [senior teachers] take staff from my class [CODE: RESOURCING] and [CODE: DECISION MAKING] and then I go in to be 1:1 [CODE: SUPPORT MODEL] and [CODE: ROLE OF TEACHER]

I4: Sometimes it can be quite lonely [for her class LSAs] if they’re off all the time following their own 1:1 curriculum, [CODE: SUPPORT MODEL] and [CODE: ALONE] they don’t get a chance to see other staff [CODE: ALONE] and [CODE: NON-FORMAL LEARNING], they don’t get a chance to see other students [CODE: UNFAMILIAR STUDENT], it can feel very much like you’re not really a part – feel like you’re not part of a class or a team or a community [CODE: ALONE], [CODE: NON-FORMAL LEARNING] and [CODE: COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE] you’re just one person and one student and you’re solely responsible for them [CODE: ROLE OF LSA]

**3.7.3.2 Searching for themes**

Having categorised my extracts into numerous codes, and during a lengthy process of reflection and iteration, I began to collate codes into initial themes. Example 2, overleaf, illustrates the process of my iterations regarding some of the themes that were incorporated into my overarching theme of ‘Discretion’.

At this point I need to clarify that I did not use any qualitative data analysis software to assist me with the thematic analysis of my data. I have had previous experience of ‘NVivo’ software (www.qsrinternational.com) and I felt this hindered, rather than assisted, my thinking. I found that by using a computer-based system the process was so automated it became rather too easy to allocate codes to themes by moving the data on screen without giving sufficient time for reflection and consideration.

And so, I moved from using my computer and printed out and cut up the contents of my coding folders and manually moved them around (on my floor) into the various initial themes that I had begun to generate. Needless to say, this was a very lengthy process.
Example 2: Collating codes into initial themes

[I4]: they [senior teachers] take staff from my class [CODE: DECISION MAKING] Move to theme: Discretion

[I13]: I’ve been in a classroom on my own with one student and it was very, very lonely [CODE: ALONE] Move to theme: Isolated

[I15]: but quite often like the Comm’s book’s not there because they’re [senior teachers] still trying to sort out the staffing [CODE: STAFF SHORTAGES] Move to theme: Lack of LSA resource

[I20]: No disrespect to agency staff, but it’s almost like you’ve got two students to work with that day, because you’ve got to look out for them [CODE: STAFF SHORTAGES] Move to theme: Lack of LSA resource

[I12]: I’ve said many a time [to her class teacher] ‘could you show me what you mean – how do you want me to deliver this lesson?’ [CODE: TEACHERS’ AVAILABILITY] Move to theme: Teachers’ supernumerary status

3.7.3.3 Defining and naming themes

Having collated the extracts from the twenty-five interviews into initial themes, I then reviewed all of these initial themes and refined them; again, this was a lengthy, iterative process. I provide an example, in Figure C overleaf, of how I began to develop the thematic map for ‘Discretion’.
Whilst the concept of ‘Discretion’ had been introduced in the WALF by Felstead and colleagues (2009), and therefore it was not surprising that it formed one of my main themes, there were several aspects that emerged inductively as I analysed my data. For example, the impact of the geography of the school building and the outcomes for LSA on-the-job learning as a result of the way individual teachers managed their time. As a consequence, it was only during the latter stages of my analysis that I realised the full impact of the way in which LSAs experienced the affordance and exercise of discretion at Willowbank, and the outcome this had on their learning and development. The theme of discretion then became significant in shaping my conclusions regarding my research question, as will become apparent as this dissertation progresses.

3.7.4 Participant Observations

I recorded the meetings where I was a participant observer and transcribed them in their entirety. I coded the transcripts from these meetings in the same way as I did for the interview data and, in the same way, collated the codes into themes. I added a category for my interactions at these times, as what I said and did formed part of the research data. For example, as I listened to the recording of the teachers’ training I delivered I was reminded of my ‘business persona’ when I had worked in the private
sector, because I noted that in my role as trainer I challenged the thinking of the attendees in a way that I had not done in the one-to-one interviews.

3.7.5 Non-participant observations

I had attended two training courses at the university on observation in the workplace, and the way in which I approached my observations at Willowbank was guided by what I had learnt in these sessions. My observational notes included noting the space in which I was the observer, the individuals and artefacts/objects present, the structure of the event, and the elements of the interaction, what was said, and my own situation in the setting. Many of my observations have been captured in the vignettes I provide at the beginning of several of the chapters, and are noted in the text throughout this thesis.

I used notebooks to record my observations. I did not type these recordings into documents, because keeping the words in their original state on the page helped me bring the situations to mind. Whilst reading my observations I typed up any thoughts I had, for example if certain spaces or times of day had certain things in common (such as the opportunistic conversations in the reception area, and the scarcity of any conversation between staff along certain corridors). In addition, I often digitally recorded my reflections immediately after I had spent time observing around school (usually sitting in my car in the school car park, so there was no risk I would be over heard). For example, if the day had been a particularly stressful one for certain members of staff because of behavioural incidents I added these recorded reflections to my typed document.

I used my observations to inform the interviews, and I also referred to them as I was carrying out my analysis and reflecting on my findings as they provided context to the picture that was emerging. For example, the movement of LSAs around school at the end of the day in search of available computers, and the attention given to the “Comms book” in Reception. The significance of these examples is discussed in my findings chapters, which follow.
3.8 Conclusion

By adopting an ethnographic approach to collect my data I set out to gather wide-ranging views and insights into the learning culture at my case study school. When considering the different perspectives of the people involved in this study, I also had to contemplate my own; because how I interpreted the data was influenced by my values and experiences, including those that have resulted from the multiple roles I have had at the school. I was mindful of this and understood the importance of reflecting on my decisions throughout the study. As Simons notes being reflexive is “particular importance in qualitative case study where you are re-presenting the experience of others, constructing an interpretation of the reality you observed and the stories people told you” (2009, page 91).

Some researchers might query the extent to which one specific case can inform a wider audience about learning theory, policy and practice. I would argue that given the limited research on the subject of workplace learning for paraeducators, and LSAs in particular, the findings from this study will be a valuable addition to the literature. Moreover, the conclusions drawn from this research could provide useful pointers for managers of classroom support assistants, in different educational settings, in their approach to the development of their staff.

And so, in this ethnographic research I set out to illuminate the various factors that shape an organisation’s approach to the development of the LSA workforce, and the extent to which this important group of educators are equipped to provide world class educational support. In the chapters that follow I go on to discuss the key features that emerged from my research and what my undertaking contributes to workplace learning theory and knowledge in the area of special educational needs.
CHAPTER FOUR

Willowbank: a productive system

The end of the day

I am at Willowbank Special School at 3pm on a Thursday. Class C’s teacher, Louise, is persuading Jake to take his coat off its peg, pick up his bag and walk down the corridor to the hall, where his taxi driver is waiting; the conversation is done using sign language as Jake is unable to communicate verbally and is learning to develop his signing skills. Later Louise tells me Jake has had a pretty good day today, only one incident earlier when another student came too near to him in cookery and Jake became anxious and agitated, but the episode was managed well and did not escalate into something more serious. There are times when Jake becomes so anxious and frustrated he lashes out, and without skilful intervention by staff is in danger of harming himself and others. Jake’s ability to manage his anxiety today is a great step forward and the teacher is very pleased.
Aahil skips along the corridor, flapping his hands at me in greeting and Chloe, his Learning Support Assistant, gestures to him to slow down. In the hall taxi drivers and escort staff wait for their charges to arrive, so they can help them into the transport that will take them home. Russell, Sophie and Bilal are happy to get into their taxi bus, but Martin shows signs of anxiety about his taxi journey and becomes highly distressed, violently slamming his feet on his wheelchair footrests and hitting his head with his hands. His two Learning Support Assistants immediately put into practice their well-rehearsed routine, calming Martin and this time his anxiety lowers within fifteen minutes and does not develop into something more severe. Martin becoming calmer is a relief to everyone as his behaviour can be extremely challenging, and the school staff who support him are constantly vigilant of signs that his emotional state is deteriorating. Martin can cause considerable harm to himself and others, and such episodes are physically and psychologically tough for staff to manage.

Other Learning Support Assistants escort pupils to the on-site children’s homes, where they hand over responsibility for the students to the residential care staff; the school staff will return to collect students at 8.40am the following morning, when the school day begins once again. Some pupils are in wheelchairs, others are encouraged to walk with their frames or supported by their member of staff, and some students walk unaided. The residential houses are quite near, across the sensory garden with its benches, scented flowers and herbs, textured plants and all-weather musical instruments.

At the same time, a few teachers and Learning Support Assistants are standing by cars that are parked in the parking bays at the front of the school, talking to parents about the day their child has had, handing over school bags, communication aids and disability equipment. By the time pupils have left school it is some time after 3pm when the Thursday afternoon class meetings are due to start and Class C’s meeting is about to get underway.

On the corridor outside Class C there is a large display with photographs of the six pupils in the class and alongside a large cork board with symbols, and the related sign language, describing what each pupil does and doesn’t like. For example, Mark likes number work on his iPad and doing art, but does not like meeting new people
or loud noise; Aahil likes ‘Wake up and Shake up’ exercises in the hall, but doesn’t like to sit down for more than five minutes, particularly if there are other people near to him. There is also a picture of the class ‘Star of the Week’ and this week it is Aahil who is the class Star for managing to stay in Friday’s assembly for five minutes. I enter Class C’s classroom, where Louise is the teacher. Because of the learning difficulties experienced by several of the students in Class C, three of the students are each supported by two LSAs, so the class teaching team consists of one teacher and nine LSAs.

The large classroom is sparsely furnished with a computer in the far-left hand corner of the room and three screened off working areas for the three pupils who use this room; two of the other pupils have a similar classroom next door because, unlike in a mainstream classroom, the class does not all learn together in the same room. There are two large cupboards against the back wall and a walk-in cupboard in one corner. In the middle of one wall is an interactive screen, which is one of the few noticeable features in the room. In comparison to a mainstream classroom the room seems rather dull, but this is because all unnecessary equipment must be out of sight and distractions kept to a minimum owing to the learning difficulties experienced by the pupils. Natural light comes through the windows all along the far side of the room, where there is also a door to an outside area. Having immediate access to outside is reassuring for pupils, who can feel overwhelmed by the activity going on around them. The remaining pupil, Mary, currently has her own classroom whilst Louise and Mary’s Learning Support Assistant, Hattie, teach her communication and social skills to develop her confidence and her ability to interact appropriately with others.

At 3.15pm two of the LSAs attending the meeting are in the classroom getting their green student folders out to write up notes and to refer to during the meeting. The staff in Louise’s class are extremely friendly and say ‘hello’ to me and ask how I am, and bring me into their conversation about how busy the week has been. Louise tells me that the class is four LSAs down owing to sickness and that it has been a very demanding time. Three more LSAs enter the classroom at 3.20pm. Jane, an agency LSA who has worked at the school many times, asks who wants tea and coffee. Someone comments that the remaining LSA who is due to attend, Jackie, may be late.
as she is attending another meeting. Several of us collect chairs from Class C’s second classroom next door and put them around the large table, which is against one of the walls. The conversation revolves around the difficult week they have all had because so many staff are absent, but there is a lot of accompanying laughter and expressions of relief that despite the difficulties the week - for the most part - has gone well. Within minutes the table is crammed with numerous green pupil files, pieces of paper, forms, pens and pencils.

When Jane returns with the drinks and all the class team is seated it is 3.40pm, later than the scheduled Thursday class meeting time of 3.30pm. The requirement to have a class meeting every Thursday afternoon was recently introduced by the Headteacher to ensure every class group sits down together once a week and organising other meetings at the same time is frowned upon, but still happens occasionally as is evidenced by Jackie’s absence. There is a lot to discuss as team members have been to other meetings throughout the week and they need to feed information back to their colleagues, as well as sharing stories and advice about individual students and offering each other support. Starting a class meeting late is a regular occurrence and is far from ideal because most of the LSAs are contracted to work until 4pm, and many will need to leave on time to collect their own children from school and child-minders. LSAs on higher grades - Level 3s and Senior LSAs - work until 4.30pm.

When the meeting begins in earnest teacher Louise puts a very large box of ‘Heroes’ chocolates in the centre of the table, saying to her team “because you’re all heroes”.
4.1 Introduction

I have written the preceding vignette to provide the reader with a snapshot of the end of the day at Willowbank and to offer an insight into the differences between this school and those of mainstream educational environments. It also illustrates the learning needs of the pupils who attend the school and shows the skills and knowledge required of the school workforce in order to support those needs. By furnishing the reader with this backdrop my aim is to provide some background to the narrative that follows.

4.2 Cedars Trust

Willowbank special school is part of a charitable organisation called Cedars Trust and the entire organisation is situated on the same eighty-acre rural site. Figure D, overleaf, illustrates the organisational structure of the Trust.
The Chief Executive of Cedars Trust reports to the Trust’s Board of Directors (until recently called Trustees) and strategic decisions made at Board level are cascaded down to the organisation’s Executive Leadership Team (ELT). Decisions made by the ELT determine the strategic priorities and operational plans of Willowbank and Oak Specialist College and, as part of the Trust, Willowbank and Oak Specialist College adhere to the organisational policies determined by the Trust’s Chief Executive and ELT. The Headteacher of the school and the Head of Oak Specialist College are members of the ELT, a group that also includes the Human Resources Director, the Director of Care and the Finance Director. The full board of School Governors meet once per term to discuss the running and management of Willowbank, and there are individual Governor sub-committees, which meet at least once a term and oversee such areas as finance, curriculum and quality improvement.
Oak Specialist College also has a Board of Governors that operates in a similar way, but separately, to the school.

4.3 Willowbank Special School

I provided some brief details about Willowbank in the previous chapter and I expand on those details here.

Willowbank began its life as a school for the deaf, and from the 1950s has occupied the site of an old army barracks in eighty acres of land in a rural setting on the outskirts of a large city in England. In the past fifteen years, the school has changed its admission criteria, because the majority of students with hearing impairments are now educated in mainstream schools. In this time Willowbank has become a highly-respected school that supports the education of children and young people with very complex learning disabilities. At the time of my research there were forty-seven pupils, aged between three and eighteen years, on the school roll (the maximum number of pupils the school can admit is fifty and this is determined by the available space in the school building). Willowbank is a non-maintained school because it is part of the Cedars Trust charitable organisation, but without exception pupils’ fees are paid by local authorities (from a wide geographical area), because these authorities are unable to provide the appropriate level of specialist educational support through other means. Approximately half of the pupils are residential and live in purpose built houses on the same site as the school; depending on their circumstances pupils can board weekly or termly, and a minority of students have a 52-week residential placement. Willowbank received ‘Outstanding’ judgements from Ofsted in 2009 and 2012.

The history of the school is relevant, because the school building is testament to its earlier days when its physical layout did not cause problems for pupils with hearing difficulties, but with the changing needs of its students the physical spaces have become increasingly difficult to navigate and major changes are required. However, given that Willowbank is currently having to operate in an austere economic climate, the financial resources to address the substantial changes needed are not available (although a new building has been designed). The layout of Willowbank is relevant
to the subject of this thesis, and to that end I have drawn floorplans of the school; these are shown in Figure E and Figure F overleaf.
Figure E: Layout of ground floor of Willowbank School

Teachers on Beacon, Chiltern and Malvern corridors:

Class A: Michelle
Class B: Rosie (3 days) and Kativa (2 days)
Class C: Louise (Senior teacher)
Class D: Alexandra (replaced Natalie in April)
Class E: Ruth
Class F: Cerys (Senior teacher)
Teachers on Woburn and Bray corridor
Class G: Josie (replaced Davina, joined in summer term)
Class H: Stephanie
Class I: Evelyn
Class J: Liz (Senior teacher)
4.4 The organisational context

At the time of my study Cedars Trust was undergoing a period of change, which began just before my fieldwork commenced and continued throughout the time of my research; these changes had ramifications for Willowbank. In the summer prior to the start of my study, the Chief Executive had communicated their five-year strategy for Cedars Trust to staff. This strategy stated that the organisation would become an educational centre of excellence for children and young people with complex learning disabilities, and therefore the school would be required to demonstrate that its staff were equipped to provide outstanding educational provision. The strategic objectives also included - amongst other things - the development of outreach specialist services and Willowbank senior managers were expected to identify teachers and LSAs who had the ability, or the potential, to be involved in outreach provision, and support them to develop the necessary skills to accomplish this goal. A further objective was the expansion of on-site facilities to provide accredited training for external organisations who work with children and young people with complex learning disabilities and a new training manager was to be appointed to facilitate this, but they were not in post during the time of my fieldwork. An associated point to note here is that during the time of my research there was little proactive activity by the training manager in the identification of suitable external training, or in the assessment of the quality and suitability of in-house and on-the-job training for Trust staff. In reality, this individual acted more in an administrative capacity, booking staff onto training and arranging the logistics of in-house courses.

The Cedars Trust corporate strategy underpinned the organisational priorities for all the departments within the Trust and was a corporate plan mindful of the need to maintain pupil numbers and increase potential sources of income, during a period of fiscal constraint. Furthermore, at a time of economic hardship, the Directors and Executive Leadership Team of Cedars Trust were fully aware that local authorities were looking to maximise the limited funding they had at their disposal and that the cost of fees and the breadth of services provided were subject to close examination. The Trust placed high expectations on its middle managers to help their teams to contribute to the success of the five-year strategy and a programme of managerial
training, known as ‘Boost’, was launched by Human Resources across all the Trust’s departments. Consequently, at the start of the new school year all of Willowbank’s teachers became line managers of the LSAs in their classes, when previously the three senior LSAs had been responsible for the supervision of the learning support assistants. These supervisions had been managed in a somewhat informal manner, although the discussions were documented, but the senior paraeducators did not monitor the classroom practice of the LSAs as part of their role. By the time my fieldwork began at the school a few teachers had been on the Boost course, but it would be a further eight months - and nearly the end of the academic year - before any more teachers were given the opportunity to attend this middle managers’ training. In addition, several months prior to my fieldwork, a new performance management process had been introduced and the teachers, as new line managers, were expected to be instrumental in its successful implementation at the school.

Some further recent historical information is needed in order to contextualise the views of many of the staff at Willowbank towards Cedars Trust’s management. In the autumn of 2011 when the stringent financial cuts of the Coalition government began to take effect, the Trust’s Directors and Chief Executive looked to make savings to offset the cost constraints put in place by local authorities and because of the uncertainty surrounding future charitable donations (which had historically been of sizeable amounts from some corporate sponsors). As a result, a pay freeze was introduced for all staff across the Trust and this was still in effect at the time of my research some two years later. In addition, in 2012 the contracts of employment for LSAs were amended so that their thirty-minute lunch break became unpaid time, with the result that their working day ended at four o’clock and not half past three (as had been the case for many years). Whilst staff acknowledged that this change brought them into line with workers outside the organisation, they felt that it had been introduced in a manner that showed little understanding, by the Human Resources Director and her department in particular, of the challenging work the LSAs did and for which they were already poorly remunerated. The extension of their working day also coincided with feedback that numerous LSAs had given, in a Trust employee survey, that they were struggling with the amount of work they had to complete after the pupils had left, and many staff believed this change was linked to the information they had provided in the survey. Consequently, many LSAs felt
reluctant to provide feedback to senior managers as they feared that subsequent, and
disadvantageous, changes might result.

4.5 The educational model

The educational model in place at Willowbank was different from mainstream
schools and, indeed, many special schools that support pupils with less complex
learning disabilities. Willowbank’s Deputy Head summed up the differences in a
conversation with me:

*And they’re [mainstream teachers] planning the same thing for everybody in that
class – they might have some differentiation around the outcomes for the young
person - but the actual lesson will be the same material and the same delivery. We’re
not doing that, we’re looking at individual resources, individual plans, often in an
individual area of the school that suits that young person, and often the learning
support assistants are teaching in isolation with that child*

4.5.1 The role of the LSA

The latter sentence of the Deputy Head’s quote, above, is of particular relevance to
this thesis. At Willowbank, it was LSAs who provided the majority of educational
support, on a one-to-one basis, to pupils at the school. The specialised nature of this
support also meant that pupils and their LSAs often needed to work in individual
spaces within the school (for example, sensory rooms, single computer rooms or
separate classrooms), or in the school grounds (such as the sensory garden, on bikes,
or on outdoor equipment).

To give the reader an idea of the type of activities undertaken in a student’s session, I
have provided an example in Box 2, overleaf, of the individual short-term targets for
a pupil, which relate to the curriculum area of personal and social development
(PSD). These three related activities follow each other every Thursday morning. The
‘What’s in the box?’, sensory activity and plenary session should each last
approximately fifty minutes.
Box 2: A student's Thursday morning session (PSD curriculum area)

This session plan looks very prescriptive to those who are unfamiliar with the format and it appears that the LSA had a minimal pedagogical part to play, solely ‘delivering’ the teacher’s instructions. What is not conveyed in the plan is that the learning difficulties experienced by the students at Willowbank meant that very often they were unable to achieve the short-term target within the session and the LSA needed to work out an alternative strategy to help the pupil progress towards the goal. This required an understanding of the underlying disability (or disabilities) and the knowledge and skill to modify the session whilst it is in progress. Moreover,
often the movements and behaviours of the students are barely noticeable and can be easily overlooked to the untrained and inexperienced eye.

Because of the highly individualised educational support required by students at Willowbank, each pupil was assigned to one specific LSA who acted as their ‘keyworker’, this keyworker worked with their pupil for the majority of the time for the entire academic year. There were several reasons for this way of organising the work; firstly, the pupils could become unsettled by uncertainty and inconsistency and therefore they benefit from working with one person, with whom they develop a trusting relationship. Secondly, because each student had such individualised learning needs it would not have been possible for every LSA working in a class to develop the level of understanding required to support all of the students. Whilst it was the teacher who designed the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for each student and wrote the lesson plans, it was down to the pupil’s keyworker - their LSA - to put these plans into action with the student, helping them to develop communication and life skills, and so increase their independence. Over the course of the school year an LSA built up an extensive understanding of - and rapport with - their pupil. Because of the limited time the class teacher spent with each pupil and their LSA, they were expected to involve the keyworker in decisions about revisions to the lesson plans, and LSAs should have proactively informed them of any matters that arose during their sessions with pupils and which required their teacher’s attention.

Keyworkers were assigned to pupils by the Headteacher, following discussion with the three senior teachers at the school. Information detailing the class teacher, class team of LSAs and keyworker/pupil allocation was communicated to staff and parents in July, in advance of the start of the new academic year in September. When the class teacher knew their allocated class team, they assigned each LSA an additional role of ‘secondary’ worker for the pupils in the class. The secondary worker was a member of the class team who needed to have enough knowledge about their second pupil, so they could work with them effectively when the pupil’s keyworker was unavailable; in this way in every class each LSA was a keyworker and a secondary worker. It was the responsibility of the keyworker to make certain the secondary worker was kept informed of information relating to their student. The keyworker should also have ensured that their pupil’s ‘Communication Passport’ contained up-
to-date information. Every pupil had a Communication Passport and this provided basic information about their school day, their likes and dislikes and the method they used for communication; this document was taken with the pupil everywhere they went, so that anyone who did not know the pupil had ready access to this information. More detailed information about pupils was kept in the classrooms in files providing information on, amongst other things, their medical needs, behavioural plans, communication strategies and hard copies of their IEPs. The IEP and ongoing educational record for every pupil was held on the school’s ‘Exchange’ computer system and this was where information was updated every day by LSAs and teachers, along with any behaviour incident report forms.

4.5.2 The role of the teacher

The role of the teacher at Willowbank was markedly different from their mainstream counterparts because their time was spent teaching pupils on an individual basis, either working with a student for the whole fifty-minute session, or moving around different pupils to teach them for shorter periods of time. Furthermore, the teacher was expected to model the session to the LSA (the pupil’s keyworker), who worked with the pupil for the entire time, and explain their reasoning behind the activity, providing advice and monitoring the LSA’s practice. In this way, these teachers were teaching and assessing the pupils, whilst also providing on-the-job training to LSAs, and at Willowbank the terms ‘supernumerate’ and ‘supernumerary’ are used to describe the way in which these teachers work.

It is important to note the distinction between supernumerate time and ‘non-contact’ time (planning, preparation and assessment time, shortened to ‘PPA’), which is mandatory for all teachers, irrespective of educational setting. Teachers at Willowbank were allocated ten per cent of their working time as non-contact, in the same way as their mainstream peers. Moreover, the teachers at Willowbank were also given half a day’s study leave each week to study for the DfE mandated special educational needs postgraduate qualification, in addition to the time they needed to attend university study days during the year. Given that several of the teachers were studying for a post-graduate qualification at any one time, the outcome was that there were very few weeks when there was a full complement of this group of staff in school. In this way the consequences of these DfE directives, which were designed
to help teachers address their workloads and increase their subject knowledge, was a situation whereby the LSAs - who delivered the majority of educational sessions - had highly limited access to on-the-job training from the professional educators whose plans they were expected to implement. This, in turn, affected the opportunities these paraeducators had to develop their understanding of the area and their pedagogical practice.

Willowbank’s teachers also attended meetings to discuss the specific needs of pupils with SEND, for example Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) meetings, which took place several times a year. At the MDT meetings, all those with responsibility for contributing to the educational and developmental support of the students reviewed and discussed their contributions and made any necessary adjustments to the support they need to provide. Each pupil also had an annual review, which included parents, local authorities, therapists and other interested parties, which could last several hours and required detailed documents to be prepared before and after the meeting. LSAs were also involved in preparing the documentation and could attend the meetings, if staffing levels permitted. The teachers also had frequent contact with parents because of the nature of their students’ learning difficulties, this might be by phone, email or in person, but whatever method was used the interactions had to be recorded in detail. And so, whilst the number of pupils in each class was far smaller than in mainstream classrooms, the volume of paperwork needed to support and monitor progress was significant. In addition, they visited children and young people, either at home or at their existing schools, and produced assessment reports because parents had expressed a preference for placing their child at the school (in the Education, Health and Care plan). The teacher’s report guided decisions about the suitability of the school for potential pupils, although the final recommendation was made by the Headteacher in discussion with teachers and therapists. Thus, much of the work of Willowbank’s teachers took place away from their classrooms, with the associated restrictive consequences for LSA workplace training and guidance.

4.6 The WALF: LSA learning and development

In chapter two I discussed the Working as Learning Framework (WALF) (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson and Unwin, 2009) and its central themes of ‘productive systems’,
‘work organisation’ and ‘learning environments’. In this chapter I have mentioned some of the factors that have the potential to shape how the learning and development of the LSA workforce was approached at Willowbank, for example the recently communicated Cedar’s Trust’s five-year strategy, the new performance management process and the limited availability of teachers. However, as I continue to present the reader with a picture of the workings of the school, there are several further points to make when contemplating the development of the LSA workforce from the perspective of the WALF.

The first point to note was that for many years it had been the senior managers at Cedars Trust who stipulated the required training programmes for LSAs, rather than the managers at the school itself. When viewing Willowbank as a ‘productive system’, such decisions demonstrated that stakeholders higher up the structural hierarchy exerted a significant influence over the learning provision of individuals, even though they may have been unfamiliar with the work of the educators at the school. To expand on this point, the Trust’s management had mandated that all LSAs and care workers employed at Willowbank, Oak Specialist College and the residential houses passed the British Sign Language (BSL) Level One qualification, and new staff were enrolled on the course immediately they began their employment. The BSL classes took place every week, after school and were delivered on site by a member of the Trust’s training department; the course lasted for an academic year. In order to consolidate what was learnt during the signing classes it was important that learners were in frequent contact with individuals who communicated by signing, and this was not the case for many of the pupils the LSAs supported. However, the LSAs valued having the qualification as it is nationally recognised and portable should they move to work at another organisation. In addition, and some considerable time in the past, the Trustees had stipulated that all employees must take a National Vocational Qualification relevant to the setting in which they work (education or care), and therefore Willowbank LSAs took an NVQ in ‘Supporting Teaching and Learning’ and were registered for the qualification within six months of joining the school. As noted in the literature review, the benefits for this specialised group of educators of taking an NVQ designed for mainstream settings has been questioned in the literature and by paraeducators themselves. The Trust’s Human Resources department, and not the school administrator, maintained records
of the qualification status for all of the LSAs, and monitored completion of both the BSL and NVQ courses.

In addition, the Trust’s training manager coordinated a one-week generic induction course for all new starters employed at the school, the college and the residential houses. This generic course included general employee information (such as the ‘clocking’ on and off procedure, company absence policy, safeguarding procedures) and basic information on complex learning disabilities and the legally required training in behaviour management. Until shortly before my fieldwork began this generic training had taken place over two weeks, and employees did not begin working with pupils until they had completed it. However, a few months before I went into the school, two of the senior LSAs at Willowbank had requested that the time for the generic training be reduced to one week and set about designing a specific induction course aimed at the needs of new LSAs at the school. These experienced LSAs were prompted to canvas for this change because they had been receiving feedback that the general nature of the Trust’s course did not prepare LSAs adequately for the type of working they would be undertaking at the school. And so, by bringing responsibility for the induction training further down the organisational hierarchy, these senior LSAs were able to tailor the content more specifically to Willowbank’s LSAs, giving them information on topics relevant to their work (for example a session on autism, multisensory impairment and personal care). Despite this change, the LSA specific induction could only provide an overview of the topics, given the limited time the LSAs had at their disposal since they had already started working at the school; as a result, their induction took place during eight twilight sessions over six weeks, each lasting approximately forty minutes.

In addition, eighteen months prior to my fieldwork the Headteacher and Deputy Head at the school introduced another training initiative. This development was the selection of a few LSAs who worked with pupils with multisensory impairments (for example students who were deaf-blind, had limited vision and hearing, or had conditions that affected their visual perception and balance) to attend the ‘Intervenor’ course run by the charity Sense (www.sense.org.uk), which had recently gained university accreditation and received very positive feedback from those working in the disability sector. The Intervenor course had also come to the notice of
local authorities and some had started to specify, on Education, Health and Care Plans, that LSAs working with pupils with multisensory impairments had to have the qualification. This development led to the school accelerating the number of LSAs attending the course, with the result that twenty LSAs qualified as Intervenors over a two-year period. An equivalent course for the LSAs who supported pupils with autism spectrum disorders was not available, but in recognition that these paraeducators required more in-depth knowledge than that provided in the twilight training session, the Headteacher approached the Head of College, who had recently gained a postgraduate degree in Autism. Accordingly, an in-house course was designed and the content was delivered lecture style to groups of LSAs from Willowbank and Oak Specialist College. The course was not accredited at the time of my fieldwork, although there were plans to seek university accreditation, particularly as accreditation would lead the way to providing the course externally, contributing towards Cedars Trust’s five-year strategic plan. Furthermore, given that local authorities were beginning to stipulate the Intervenor qualification on Education, Health and Care Plans, then having an externally recognised in-house course would be highly beneficial for Willowbank in securing local authority placements, if a similar requirement for LSAs supporting pupils with autism came into effect.

Thus, LSAs were exposed to predominantly formal learning methods with little time devoted to on-the-job training, as evidenced by the limited amount of time given to the school specific induction training. In order to illustrate the amount of formal learning the staff at Willowbank had undertaken, I provide the details of the interviewees who participated in my research, in Table 4 overleaf (this extends the information I provided in Table 2 in the previous Methodology chapter). A number of the interviewees were teachers, who were required by the DfE to have a postgraduate qualification in SEND. However, as will be apparent from the table, the LSAs had extensive qualifications and these individuals were representative of many of their colleagues, who were also pursuing - or had gained - degrees and diplomas in SEND.
Table 4: Interviewee details including qualifications

N.B. The key to abbreviations is given at the end of the table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee number</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>Yrs at Willow bank</th>
<th>Qualifications and training</th>
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<tr>
<td>I1</td>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Headteacher</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>B.Ed.; Teacher of the Deaf; BM</td>
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<td>I2</td>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Deputy Head</td>
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<td>B.Ed.; Teacher of the Deaf; PG Diploma MSI &amp; PLD; BM</td>
</tr>
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<td>I3</td>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Senior teacher</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>B.Ed.; BM; BSL L1; MA Autism (ongoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I4</td>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>&lt;1</td>
<td>PGCE; BM; BSL L1; PG National Award for SEN Coordination; MA in education (SEN);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I5</td>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>BSL L1,2 &amp; 3; NVQ L3 TA; Intervenor; BM; Diploma L5 in Education &amp; Teaching;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I6</td>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; Cert. Teaching; MSc MSI &amp; PLD; BPhil MSI (ongoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I7</td>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>&lt;2</td>
<td>PGCE; BSL L1; BM; (left school during fieldwork)</td>
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<tr>
<td>I8</td>
<td>Louise</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Senior teacher</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>PGCE; BSL L1; BM; PG Diploma in Deaf Education; MA Deaf Education (ongoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I9</td>
<td>Collette</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Assistive Technologist (former LSA)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>BSL L1; NVQ L3 in ST&amp;L; BA Childhood &amp; Youth studies; PG cert. SEN assistive technology; BM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I10</td>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; B.Ed.; Advanced certificate in visual impairment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I11</td>
<td>Cerys</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Senior teacher</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>BA (Ed.); BM; BSL L1; Qualified teacher visual impairment; PG Diploma in PLD</td>
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<tr>
<td>I12</td>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Senior LSA</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>BSL L1; NVQ L3 in ST&amp;L; NVQ L4 Management;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>I13</td>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Level 3 LSA</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>BSL L1; NVQ L3 TA; NVQ L3 Independence; Autism (in-house); BM; Diploma in Childhood psychology</td>
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<tr>
<td>I14</td>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Occupational Therapist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; BTEC Diploma in Nursery nursing; BSc in Occupational Therapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>I15</td>
<td>Fleur</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>LSA</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>BSL L1; NVQ L3 TA; BM; Cert. of Higher Education in PMLD; Intervenor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I16</td>
<td>James</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Therapy Technician</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; BA Art; Physiology and massage; qualified rebound instructor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I17</td>
<td>Gilly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Senior audiologist</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>BSc (Hons) Human Biology; BSc (Hons) Environmental Sciences; BSL; MSc Audiological Science; BM;</td>
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<tr>
<td>I18</td>
<td>Eleanor</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>LSA</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; NVQ L3 TA; NVQ Nursing</td>
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<tr>
<td>I19</td>
<td>Debbie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Level 3 LSA (autism champion)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; NVQ L3 Childcare; Autism (in-house); Foundation degree ‘Working with children and young people’;</td>
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<tr>
<td>I20</td>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>LSA</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; NVQ L3 in ST&amp;L; Intervenor;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I21</td>
<td>Pip</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Level 3 LSA (hearing impairment champion)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; BA Early childhood studies; Intervenor</td>
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<tr>
<td>I22</td>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Senior LSA</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; BTEC diploma in Childhood Studies; NVQ L3 Supporting young people; CACHE Working with children with SEN; Foundation degree ‘Working with children and young people’;</td>
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<tr>
<td>123</td>
<td>Carolyn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>LSA</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; NVQ in Specialist support teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>124</td>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Level 3 LSA (Habilitation specialist)</td>
<td>~10 (not continuous)</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; Higher National Diploma in Early Childhood Studies; Intervenor; Diploma in Habilitation and Disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>125</td>
<td>Hattie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>LSA</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>BSL L1; BM; NVQ; Autism (in-house)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key:**
B.Ed. = Bachelor of Education; PGCE = Postgraduate Certificate in Education
MSI = Multisensory impairment; VI = Visual impairment;
PLD = Profound Learning Disabilities; BM = accredited behaviour management training;
BSL = British Sign Language; L = Level; TA = Teaching Assistant;
ST&L = Supporting Teaching and Learning
LSA qualifications in green = gained prior to working at Willowbank
Qualifications in blue = self-funded by LSA

When thinking about the productive systems aspect of the WALF and how it can relate to my research, I want to draw attention to the writings of economist Frank Wilkinson (1983) and his summation of the utility of a productive systems model:

*The concept of productive systems ... is perfectly general in its application and provides the basis for analysis at any level – the family, productive units, firms ... Where the boundaries are drawn depends on the problem in hand* (1983, page 421)

With Wilkinson’s words in mind and drawing on Felstead et al’s (2009) model (which was featured in chapter two) I illustrate, in Figure G overleaf, how I have adapted the systems of production of the WALF to my research setting.
Figure G: Willowbank School: A productive system of special educational provision
(Adapted from Felstead, et al., 2009)

**A: Structures of Production of educational provision at Willowbank**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department for Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cedars Trust Executive Leadership Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willowbank Senior Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Support Assistants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**B: Stages of production of educational provision at Willowbank**

| Development of Individual Education Plans | Planning of pupil sessions | Delivery of one-to-one sessions | Recording and evaluation of pupil sessions | Evaluation and revisions to Individual Education Plans |
4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have painted a picture of the workings of Willowbank and in doing so I have illustrated how the daily life of its staff, and the approach of managers to their development, were affected not only by the school’s own internal workings, but by wider considerations from Cedars Trust and the broader SEND landscape. I have also shown that a significant feature at Willowbank was the way in which the work was positioned around the one-to-one educational model. Furthermore, I have begun to signal the usefulness of the WALF (Felstead, et al., 2009; Felstead, Fuller, Jewson and Unwin, 2011) as an “empirical tool to excavate the relationship between working and learning more deeply and across a much larger canvas” (Felstead, et al., 2009, page 197).
CHAPTER FIVE

Staffing levels and workplace learning

“Messy play at 11!”

The teacher in Class A, Michelle, has arrived at school at 7.30am to go through her plans for the day. Michelle’s two classrooms are at the far end of Beacon corridor. As you walk along the corridor different objects are fixed to the walls – chimes that jangle when you hit them, bells that ring, little yellow doors that open and close, and hard and soft textures to feel as you go past.

The pupils in Michelle’s class are the youngest in the school, aged between four and seven years, and for most of them Willowbank is the first school they have attended. Class A has two classrooms at the end of Beacon corridor on the left-hand side. The class you come to first, and which is used for the morning greeting, has the teacher’s desk in the right-hand corner and Michelle is sitting at the desk on the computer. In between the door and the teacher’s desk is a huge television, which has framed pictures of each of the pupils on top of it. Underneath the television are boxes
labelled with the days of the week, which contain the objects used for the morning greeting. Spray bottles with scented water for each day (today is Wednesday, so the scent will be lemon), a variety of tactile objects to represent each day (it will be a little bean bag today) and various musical instruments for the pupils to use in the morning greeting song. There are cards showing symbols for the morning greeting activities (such as ‘hello’, ‘we work together’ and ‘we play together’). Every word spoken is also signed because four of the pupils in Class A haven’t developed the ability to speak yet.

Michelle is keen to help her pupils to learn social skills and she plans several sessions during the week where all of the pupils and staff are together, such as the session in the large sensory room on a Thursday before lunch, and music in the well-equipped music room followed by PE on a Friday afternoon. Not only does this help the pupils learn to socialise and work with others, it also enables the staff to get to know the other pupils in the class, while still enabling each child to have the one to one educational support they require. However, Michelle also needs to have contingency plans for times when the usual one to one support can’t be put in place and on occasions such as these the class come together for ‘messy play’.

Michelle looks at what she has planned for herself and her class team today. There are five pupils in Class A and five LSAs. Her most senior LSA, Caroline, will work with Chloe for most of the day. Chloe is four years old and is blind; unlike many individuals with visual impairment Chloe has no residual vision at all and is therefore unable to distinguish between light and dark, which makes navigating her environment extremely difficult. An important aspect of Caroline’s work with Chloe is helping her to use her cane effectively. Chloe hates her cane as she would rather have the security of holding Caroline’s hand the whole time, but for Chloe to be as independent as possible it is important that she learns how to use her cane at an early age. Caroline and Chloe have regular sessions with the Occupational Therapist, Vicky, who is keen to ensure Chloe’s cane is the right height and weight for her, and that it is comfortable to hold. Caroline also seeks out Laura for advice; Laura is an experienced LSA and trained Intervenor, who has also recently completed her two-year Diploma in Habilitation and Disabilities and was recently appointed as the school’s Habilitation Specialist. Michelle has planned to work with
Chloe for the first session today to see how she is progressing with learning to use her cane; Michelle particularly wants to assess if Chloe can walk from one end of Beacon corridor to the other with only her cane to guide her. Michelle ties her working with Chloe in with Caroline’s non-contact time first thing on Wednesdays because as a Senior LSA Caroline has responsibility for Health and Safety at the school, and needs this time to carry out the relevant checks and to catch up on the associated paperwork.

Michelle has planned to work with Ben and his LSA, Barbara, for the second session of the morning. Barbara recently joined the school and is still developing her understanding of the breadth of the LSA role. Michelle wants to see if Ben is progressing with his number work and also wants to go through the ‘next step’ section on Ben’s lesson plan with Barbara. The LSA is struggling to record the appropriate level of detail about what Ben has learnt in each session, so Michelle is unsure if her lesson plan for Ben is being followed correctly and whether any of his targets on the lesson plan need to be revised. Michelle will use this time to model what she would like Barbara to do in the lesson, to make sure Barbara fully understands the approach she needs to take with Ben and the reasons behind it. The teacher will then help Barbara to record her observations in the ‘next step’ section of the plan, so she knows what is needed.

For the third session of the day, Michelle will work with Jack and his LSA, Kelly. Kelly is very experienced and has supported pupils with challenging behaviour for many years. Jack wears a special padded hat because when he becomes agitated he bangs his head on the floor and his distress is difficult to manage and upsetting to witness. Kelly’s experience is invaluable at times such as these. Michelle is keen to work with Jack and Kelly because she put new communication targets in place two weeks ago; Michelle and Kelly think the progress Jack is making using his communication board has lowered his anxiety and frustration and recently there has been a reduction in behavioural incidents. Jack remains uneasy about working with anyone other than Kelly, although he tolerates Michelle being with him.

Susie, the fourth pupil in the class, and Zoe her LSA, will spend some of the morning with the speech and language therapist, Gillian, in one of the small sensory rooms on Chiltern corridor. Michelle will catch up with Zoe about the session at the end of
the day, but she also makes a mental note to email Gillian to find out how it went and whether Gillian has made any changes to her speech and language session plan, as Gillian does not proactively contact Michelle about her students. Unlike the Occupational Therapist who is frequently seen around school, Gillian does not tend to visit pupils in their classrooms and so Michelle does not manage to see her to speak to very often.

The fifth pupil, John, will work with Lorna, his LSA, at his workstation for the first session of the day; if he manages to concentrate for five minutes he will be able to go to the sensory garden for quarter of an hour. John will then spend time with Lorna taking a variety of objects out of a bag and exploring what they are, in order to develop his manual strength. Lorna and John will then go for a ride on his tandem bike to help his co-ordination skills. Michelle is satisfied that John is making good progress and that Lorna has made sure all the relevant recording is up to date. Michelle makes a note to work with John and Lorna on Friday, when she’s considering revising John’s short term targets.

Michelle checks the lunch rota to make sure she has put Zoe down for her lunch break at 12 today; Zoe didn’t manage to get her full half hour for lunch yesterday because Susie resisted walking from the swimming pool on the opposite side of the site, and by the time another LSA was free to take over from Zoe, her lunch break had almost gone. If Susie is reluctant to leave the sensory room today, then Michelle will go and take over from her.

It is now quarter past eight and Michelle looks up as three of Class A’s LSAs arrive, say ‘hello’ and start to get their resources ready for the day; they are usually in around this time, although they are not due to begin work until half past eight. They chat a little, but it is clear their focus is on the day ahead. At eight thirty the remaining two LSAs, Lorna and Barbara, enter the classroom bringing equipment they have collected en route from the cupboard in the corridor. Lorna comments to Zoe that when she collected Susie’s standing frame from the equipment cupboard she noticed that one of the fixings is coming loose. Zoe makes a note to contact James, the therapy technician, to ask if he can check the frame this morning before Susie is due to use it.
At eight forty, ten minutes before the pupils are due to arrive, the classroom is full of activity and is running like a well-oiled machine. Kelly has gone to collect Jack from ‘Oakleigh’, the on-site children’s home where he stays during the week, because his family lives sixty miles away. Michelle gets up from the computer and walks to the school’s entrance hall to have a look at the Comms book and read the messages that Cerys, one of the Senior Teachers, has written on today’s page. Michelle notes - with both irritation and resignation - that Cerys has put in the book that Kelly needs to go and work in Class D for the whole morning. One of the LSAs in Class D is absent as she was injured yesterday when her pupil bit her because he didn’t want to leave the swimming pool. Cerys wants Kelly to go to Class D because she will be working with the pupil who had the incident yesterday and the teacher in Class D needs an LSA who is experienced in managing challenging behaviour. The note in the Comms book says Cerys will try and get another LSA to cover in Class D for the afternoon, but there are five staff off sick and so making sure all of the classes are staffed appropriately is proving difficult. The Deputy Head, Sandy, is already on the ‘phone trying to arrange for agency staff to come in.

Michelle returns to her class and explains the situation to Kelly. It is clear that Michelle will need to work with Jack in Kelly’s absence as she is the only other member of the class team he is comfortable with, and it is too soon to expect him to tolerate working with another LSA. Kelly is sitting with Jack on the floor, doing his brushing routine to help him settle him into the day. Using his picture board and signing, Kelly carefully and calmly explains to Jack that this morning will be different and that Michelle will be with him. Michelle carefully takes over the brushing routine and puts Jack’s favourite song on his iPad in order to distract him as Kelly leaves the classroom. Kelly and Michelle are very encouraged as Jack deals with this change to his routine calmly.

Michelle now has ten minutes before morning greeting to reorganise the day she had planned. It is apparent that Caroline, her senior LSA, will need to forego her non-contact time to work with Chloe, as Michelle will need to support Jack until Kelly returns. Caroline good naturedly comments that she hasn’t had her non-contact time for four weeks and so another Tuesday won’t make a difference. This means that Caroline will, once again, stay late after school to do the Health and Safety checks.
It is at this point that an LSA from another class comes in and says that Lorna will need to go to the training centre at eleven o’clock because in the last few minutes the nurse from Wilford Hospital has ‘phoned Reception to say she is coming on site to teach staff how to use the ‘Epipen’ (a device that administers adrenaline to people at risk of anaphylactic shock). As John has a number of severe allergies it is essential that Lorna has this training at the earliest opportunity. Michelle laughs, puts her hands in the air and says ‘Ok everyone! Messy play at 11!’
5.1 Introduction

The vignette about Michelle and her class illustrates the issues that arose for staff at Willowbank because of the constant shortage of LSAs. The lack of paraeducators caused wide-ranging difficulties across the whole school and in this chapter I examine what these problems meant for the learning and development of the LSA workforce. And furthermore, the consequences for the educational support the pupils received.

5.2 Unpredictability and workplace learning

The unobtrusive A4 page-a-day diary, known by all as the “Comms” book (shortened from Communications book), turned out to be a significant artefact in the lives of staff at Willowbank. The Comms book served a number of purposes; it informed staff of visitors who would be looking round the school (‘Mr and Mrs Jones visiting Class B with their son, William, all morning’), prompted them of training that was taking place that day (‘Omniboard training, 3.30pm, Hall’), reminded staff of upcoming assembly theme days (‘Diwali this Friday, can anyone with spare jars for candles see Kativa and can anyone’s class make sweets on Thursday?’) and notified changes to afterschool clubs (‘Music club in dining room, not hall’). The Comms book let people know pupils’ birthdays, staff birthdays, and of new babies who had been born to staff on maternity leave (‘Charlotte had baby boy last night, both doing well. Collection money with Cynthia in office’). And so, at first glance the Comms book looked much like any other diary that imparts routine information - in a rather outmoded fashion - to staff as they come into work:

‘Everyone knows it’s there and reads it and it’s there all day. And if you’ve forgotten, [it reminds you] something is on in the hall today

Cerys (senior teacher)

And yet this unassuming artefact played a crucial part in shaping the working day of LSAs and teachers alike, because the Comms book detailed all of the changes to staffing for the coming day following ‘phone calls from staff saying they would not be in. The three senior teachers worked together to assign LSAs to cover the gaps in
staffing, and more often than not this also involved the Deputy Head contacting the company who regularly provided agency staff (at significant cost to the school) and 'phoning any Cedars Trust employees who worked as ‘bank’ staff to see if they were available. Once the staffing was organised, one of the senior teachers wrote down the staffing changes in the Comms book and the carefully choreographed, albeit unwelcome, movement of LSAs around the school began. It is for this reason that staff headed to read the Comms book as soon as they arrived:

_You come in on time at half past eight; you’ve got fifteen minutes before the students start, but quite often like the Comms book’s not there because they’re still trying to sort out the staffing. And I could make a drink, go upstairs, have a look at the emails, look if I need to get any bits together for the day and then come back down and the book’s still not there and it’s twenty to nine, so that’s difficult, but I know it’s a big job for them to try and work out staffing, it’s been a nightmare_  

Fleur (LSA)

Collette, previously an LSA and now the assistive technologist at Willowbank, questioned why the information in the Comms book could not be sent to all staff in an email. She commented that if the book was not ready when people walked through the school entrance often they would not return later to read it, which meant that important messages - not only to do with staffing - were missed (for example that the hydrotherapy pool was unavailable, or that one of the minibuses was out of action). I was surprised to learn from Collette that the use of email was not embedded in the organisation, but then I discovered that it was only two months previously that LSAs had been assigned their own school email accounts and therefore logging on to find out organisational information was not second nature to them. Nevertheless, the point made by Collette seemed a sensible one:

_The Comms book should be an email that’s sent out at ten to nine and the class get together and go through it_  

Collette (assistive technologist)
But uppermost in everyone’s mind was the information in the Comms book that impacted on staffing:

*It might say Class A need to send somebody to Class D, so then it’s just a case of very quickly going [to LSAs] ‘right, you work with him’, ‘agency you work with her – she’s doing these sessions, I’ll come and give you a hand’. It’s very much [clicks her fingers to indicate reacting quickly]. I can plan the day, but things don’t always happen as planned.

Michelle (teacher)

*Every day there would be cover because someone’s off sick, or they’ve taken a member of staff out and given me an agency, so I have to rejig my class group around because agency can only work with certain people because of behaviour and that takes far too long really. Obviously, there’s a plan beforehand and you have to re-jig it and it’s quite annoying.*

Stephanie (teacher)

On the morning, I interviewed teacher Michelle we spoke a good deal about the shortage of LSAs and the problems it caused for pupils and LSAs. She paused our conversation at twenty past eight to go and catch up with her LSAs and to look at the Comms book. She intended to return to finish the interview after ensuring everyone in her class was set up for the first session of the day, but as time went on and she did not return I guessed at the likelihood of what had happened. At nine o’clock she stuck her head into the meeting room and told me, very apologetically, that she had to go and work with a student all morning because one of her LSAs had been moved and she needed to step in. The irony was not lost on either of us.

The Comms book shaped the working day at the school and meant that numerous staff had no control over the work they were allocated. Michelle’s situation illustrates the situation that was met by all of Willowbank’s teachers on a regular basis when staff were sent to other classes at extremely short notice. Of course, the teachers’ priority was to ensure every pupil had cover for their sessions and the reorganisation of their class team sought to minimise the disruption to the students.
But what was not considered was the ongoing impact on the loss of opportunities for LSAs to develop their skills and knowledge and as the Comms book frequently reallocated staff, the chances for any meaningful workplace learning were consistently slender. For example, when a paraeducator was moved to another class to work this inevitably meant that the teacher had to work one-to-one with a pupil on their own, with the resultant loss of their opportunity to be supernumerary in the sessions being delivered by their LSAs. The loss of the teacher’s supernumerate time was highly restrictive for the development of the school’s LSAs since the supernumerary status of class teachers afforded LSAs one of the few chances they had for on-the-job learning. In this capacity, the teacher discussed the aims of the session, modelled what they wanted the LSA to do and monitored their practice.

5.3 Reduced staffing and LSA learning

When I first visited Willowbank I found it inconceivable that, on a daily basis, teachers did not know whether they would have the full complement of their class LSAs and furthermore that decisions about staff deployment, which were recorded in the Comms book, were made without consultation with class teachers. As the weeks progressed, I realised that discussions involving all of the teachers on the allocation of LSAs would be impossible and that the senior teachers, taking an overview of the whole school along with the experience and knowledge of all of the LSAs, came to a decision that was not perfect, but was the best that could be made on any given day.

So it’s very complex, it’s very complicated, it does work we can have plan A, we can have plan C, sometimes it goes to plan Z [laughter] it just depends on the day. You can go in on a Monday and so many people are off and it’s like ‘well you’re going to have to work in such and such a class and you’re going to have to work somewhere else’

Karen (LSA)

I noted earlier that the likelihood of on-the-job learning was slight for many of Willowbank’s LSAs when staffing numbers were reduced and their teachers could not work in a supernumerate capacity. But it is also true to say that, following the reallocation of LSAs, the consequences for on-the-job learning differed in each class
because it was dependent on the learning needs of the pupils and on the knowledge and experience of the staff who remained. Some students (particularly those with ASD) found working with a different LSA intolerable and it was not acceptable to risk the wellbeing of the pupil and LSA as often behavioural incidents resulted. To place an unfamiliar LSA with one of these students would also mean that very little learning would take place owing to the student’s, and LSA’s, anxiety. Teacher Ruth managed a class of three pupils with ASD, two of whom had a tendency to resort to extremely challenging (and violent) behaviour and therefore several of her team of LSAs were rarely moved out of the class:

_I have to manage my staff first and foremost... because of the changes that happen you never really know who you're going to get [as a replacement LSA]. So one of my students has a core team, you can’t swap random people in and out, it has to be someone who knows him because the risk is too high. Then I’ve got Josh who is currently being supported by an agency member of staff who isn’t behaviour management trained and cannot support behaviour, which is OK to support Josh, but I can’t then swap her to support any of the other students in the class because they need that behaviour management training._

Ruth (teacher)

Ruth’s pupils had their own classrooms because of their inability to work with other people in the room, which meant that relying on group work when staffing was low - as Michelle’s class could do - was out of the question. All three of Ruth’s pupils were supported two to one and so when she did not have her full class team Ruth would step in to act as the second LSA.
Ruth commented that while the changes in staff were not ideal, she could use her time effectively:

*I feel that is a good use of my teaching time, to be part of the numbers* [when covering for an LSA], *so when I go – especially as my boys are 2:1 as well – if I then go and support* [when all her LSAs are there], *they’re then 3:1 and it’s difficult to step in and either observe and feel useful, or step in and be the front man without making the LSAs feel useless, if you know what I mean. Actually, being part of the numbers is a good opportunity for me to model how I would like a session to be to one of the LSAs and they will then take it to the other, so it actually it works OK - not being supernumerate does not affect my teaching as much as I think some might assume it would*

Ruth (teacher)

Not only did the manner in which Ruth’s pupils were supported mean she could provide a good deal of on-the-job training, but in addition her team of LSAs had the benefit of working in pairs the entire time. This enabled them to share ideas, provide feedback on each other’s practice and learn from each other throughout the day. It also meant that Ruth’s LSAs knew how to work together when their pupils became agitated, which helped to proactively manage and lessen the severity of behavioural incidents. This was a skill that could only be learnt by working with others over a sustained period of time.

Other resourcing problems that staff had to deal with occurred when a class was one or two LSAs short for the majority of the day. This situation was particularly undesirable and the senior teachers made strenuous efforts to ensure that no class had to manage for extended periods of time without the required number of LSAs. Having more experienced LSAs in the class team was highly beneficial at such times, especially if they could support two students on their own. As the teacher, Stephanie, noted “it’s quite a skill to get something going between two students”. However, this expertise was something that very few LSAs at Willowbank had the opportunity to develop owing to the routine adherence to the one-to-one educational model in place at the school. Furthermore, the unavailability of teachers to coach
their class teams on how to manage this demanding way of supporting students limited their chances to cultivate this ability.

There were a few classes at Willowbank where students routinely had some lessons together, as was the case in Michelle’s class. As Michelle commented on the morning we met and her interview was interrupted, “we are very lucky in our class in knowing all the students, which is unusual at this school - some pupils could cope with working in group sessions much better than others”. Michelle’s paraeducators were able to adapt more nimbly on the days when staff were moved and the class had to function with a reduced number of LSAs, because the class team had already gained sufficient knowledge of each pupil to provide the necessary educational support. Stephanie was also trying to promote group sessions:

*I’m trying to introduce more group work – at least once a day. In the past I have had quite a lot of resistance to it, cos I think sometimes that LSAs can be quite shy, they don’t necessarily feel comfortable in a group and they don’t know what’s going to be asked of them, and sometimes maybe they’re nervous of what the student’s going to do, so they don’t want to push it. Now I have much less resistance because I think the team I’ve got at the moment are understanding the value of being together as a group*

Stephanie (teacher)

Fleur, a very experienced LSA in Stephanie’s class, expressed her views on the increase in group work, initially focusing on the benefits for LSA practice:

*Often, we have to double up because we’re one member down as opposed to one over, so that’s difficult. But it works in one way because you’re close together you can share your information and you can advise, so it does work in that way*

Fleur (LSA)

Whilst she accepted that this way of working was necessary given the lack of staff, Fleur mentioned that the practice was not optimal because of the restrictions this placed on those physical aspects of the students’ education that required one-to-one
support. For example, time students should be spending outside on their bicycles to develop co-ordination skills and build up strength:

So students miss out on sessions because you can’t leave that area ... It’s a hard one, like being stuck between a rock and a hard place!

Fleur (LSA)

As Fleur had mentioned, the ability to work together as a group benefitted LSAs because they were able to advise each other and observe their colleagues’ practice. At such times experienced paraeducators (such as Senior LSA Caroline and Fleur) were a valuable source of information and learning support. Furthermore, in the discussions during group sessions LSAs increased their understanding of learning disabilities and conditions more widely, and this gave them more confidence when they were asked to support pupils they did not know in other classes. Coming together for communal sessions also helped to establish a group identity and was an expansive activity for LSAs, particularly when one considers the usually isolated nature of the way their work was organised at Willowbank.

Penny, the Headteacher and Sandy, the Deputy Head were trying to encourage staff to have some class group sessions during the week, if it was feasible, to enable more flexibility in resourcing and to reduce pupils’ dependence on one-to-one support and thus increase their independence. At no point was the benefit to LSA learning mentioned when the topic of group sessions was discussed and I found myself raising the advantages for staff learning and development during the meetings, which I was attending as a participant. Such an oversight on the part of the senior managers served to emphasise my observations that the approach to workforce development at the school was essentially one of providing formal learning opportunities.
But there would always be pupils at Willowbank for whom one-to-one support was essential. Helen, an experienced Level 3 LSA, said to me when I asked her about the possibility of group work for her class when there were insufficient numbers of staff:

*It wouldn’t happen. I wouldn’t allow it! I would be running around finding somebody. You could do it over dinner, because they are all generally in the sensory room, so you could have 3 students with 2 members of staff - you know they’re quite happy there [and] somebody’s got a [two-way] radio if they’re unhappy. But for the day, no, no*

Helen (Level 3 LSA)

In my earlier point about the Comms book, I noted that at times of limited LSA resource the senior teachers decided where to place LSAs, without any consultation with the class teachers. On one level the absence of discussion was understandable because of the urgent need to provide LSA cover for pupils. But there is a wider point to consider here, to do with the development of these professional educators. The lack of discretion afforded teachers in the decision-making about which of their LSAs would be working in their classes, denied them the opportunity to learn important management skills. Such skills were needed bearing in mind the ongoing staffing situation at the school and the reactive culture that resulted. One of the senior teachers, Cerys, commented on the lack of ability some teachers demonstrated in this regard, but did not suggest a way for them to develop in this area:

*Crisis’ – may be a bit of a strong word – management. Days when staffing is really tight and you can’t do exactly what you’d got planned. I think some teachers struggle. Everything seems to stop, rather than saying ‘right you can still do that, you can do that, we’ll pair both of you up and you can work on this session’ ... Just to be able to think on their feet a bit. At times, you do feel like you’re having to spoon feed staff a little bit*

Cerys (senior teacher)

It was evident from my observations around Willowbank, and in the interviews with teachers and LSAs, that most of the teachers had not been equipped to manage the
work of several staff. Not only did this manifest itself in the “struggle” mentioned by Cerys, but also in the lack of acknowledgement by many of them that they had responsibility for training their staff. An inconsistent approach also emerged during my fieldwork as to how the teachers monitored the quality of the educational support their paraeducators provided. The concern regarding the ability of many of the teachers to manage their LSAs was raised by Penny and Sandy at a school governors’ meeting, which I attended in my capacity as a governor. As a result, I delivered training to all of the teachers during the summer term of my fieldwork. My data from this training, and my associated findings are presented in chapter seven.

5.4 Communication

As I discussed earlier in this chapter, the teachers had various strategies at their disposal for providing educational support to their pupils when they had a reduced number of staff. However, I was also keen to understand the views of LSAs who were moved to support unfamiliar students at a moment’s notice and without discussion. One of the teachers, Stephanie, summed up what an LSA should do to acquaint themselves with an unfamiliar student in advance of working with them:

    You’ve got a series of systems. So a communications passport, which is the first thing you should go and read and they should all know that, so if it’s someone from another class or an agency who’s worked here before they should immediately go to the passport that gives you lots of information about how they [the students] interact, relate, get around and understand the day. So it should give you really basic information, it’s quite a good system, it doesn’t work for all the students – on top of that you’re supposed to read the behaviour support plan, the risk assessment as well. That whole process would take between one and two hours, just to read, so if you can imagine some students would have ripped a room apart by the time you’d read all that

Stephanie (teacher)
Helen, a Level 3 LSA, who was very skilled in managing challenging behaviour and was frequently moved to other classes reiterated the point:

*There’s passports, but that’s only a brief – you try and fit as much as you can into it,*

*but it doesn’t tell you everything – you’re lucky if you have time to look at the passport ... Going into other classes there’s been times I haven’t known what I’m doing, nobody has time to tell me what I’m doing*

Helen (Level 3 LSA)

The issue of time, mentioned by Stephanie and Helen, was a significant factor in determining the amount of information the LSAs could assimilate about the unfamiliar pupils they were sent to work with, and this influenced the quality of support the paraeducators were able to provide. The pressure of time resulted from two circumstances, which related specifically to the context within which these paraeducators worked. Firstly, the nature of the learning disabilities of the pupils affected the extent the LSAs could familiarise themselves with the relevant educational plans and targets, because the students could not be left alone for more than a few moments (if at all). Secondly, their colleagues were working with their own students, often in different locations, and so they were unavailable to advise any LSAs who had come to provide temporary help. These two considerations highlight the difference between the work of these LSAs in a special school and people who work in other organisational settings. In most working environments, when an employee is sent to work in a new situation they have to spend time becoming acquainted with what is expected of them by reading the relevant organisational documentation. Furthermore, colleagues or managers are usually on hand to provide information and advice, but Willowbank’s LSAs did not have ready access to other staff in this way. I observed the resolve of LSAs in their attempts to make these difficult situations work when I walked around the school and visited classrooms:
Problem solving is probably one of the things we’re very, very good at! You do sometimes sit there scratching your head thinking ‘how the heck are we going to do this, how are we going to make this work?’ But we get by and it’s sometimes not ideal

Karen (LSA)

It was clear that the ongoing staffing problem was causing a strain on LSAs, because the amount of discretion they were expected to exercise was incommensurate with their knowledge of the pupils for whom they were providing pedagogical support. As Debbie told me:

I have never known it to be like this, where there’s always someone upset or having a moan or ‘I don’t even know if I’m doing a good job here I’ve just been thrown into it’ and it’s a shame because we’ve good staff

Debbie (Level 3 LSA)

The teachers also commented on the problems that arose from the shortfall in LSA resource:

It gets wearing. So like at the moment we’ve got a lot of absences a lot of the time; so even when I’ve got all my staff team in, somebody’s going to have to cover someone else’s class that are minus staffed, so after a while you do start to feel as if you’re losing it a little bit

Cerys (senior teacher)

I’ve just been in this morning and sat in ‘together time’ and oh it was so lovely and I thought ‘I wish I could teach like that’ - sometimes our job makes you feel like you can’t teach anymore

Stephanie (teacher)

LSAs also expressed concerns that students were not making the progress they should have been “because they are constantly having different staff” (Debbie, Level 3 LSA). The lack of resource was a regular discussion topic amongst staff at
lunchtimes and the opinion expressed by a very experienced LSAs that “we need more grown-ups!” echoed the views of everyone.

### 5.5 Staff retention

The way in which new LSAs were introduced into their working environment had a significant effect on staff retention:

*New LSAs are thrown in at the deep end and they’re not given enough preparation, it’s not enough support ... I think that is important, if you want to keep your staff they need to know what’s going to happen*

Eleanor (LSA)

Louise, the senior teacher, emphasised the problem when she told me “there was one member of my staff who lasted 3 weeks”.

The lack of training was of particular concern when novice LSAs encountered very challenging behaviour within days of starting work at the school:

*We’ve had a lot of young girls [starting as LSAs] who’ve never been in this kind of job before and when you see an 8-year-old self-harming, it’s a shock. One girl was struggling ‘I don’t know what I’m doing, we don’t get told this at training’*

Debbie (Level 3 LSA)

Collette, the former LSA who became the assistive technologist at the school, felt that the need for new LSAs to be allocated mentors was of paramount importance:

*When new LSAs come on board they should have a mentor with them - they are there [for them], first port of call, that mentor shadows them, tells them where they’re going right, tells them where they’re going wrong ... when you’re new and you’re working with a student one to one, and the teacher’s up the corridor with another student, you need to know if you’re doing it right, it’s such isolated work*

Collette (assistive technologist)
Staff had suggested to management at Willowbank that new LSAs should be able to shadow experienced colleagues for their initial phase in the job, but staffing levels and budgetary constraints prohibited this. Caroline, one of the senior LSAs, captured the reality of the situation, “well that’s a luxury - shadowing - that would be lovely, but that doesn’t happen”.

Although shadowing seemed not have been a possibility, experienced LSAs tried to support their new colleagues as best they could as Eleanor, an LSA, said “if you’ve got a new LSA in the class group the other LSAs will support them, give them advice and what have you”. Whilst it was clear that the supportive intentions were there, from my observations the time that the experienced LSAs had to offer support was very limited and the opportunities for non-formal learning were somewhat arbitrary.

When I reviewed my conversations with teachers I noted that only Cerys and Michelle had specifically mentioned that new staff needed time to acquaint themselves with the responsibilities of the work, and yet this was a frequent topic of concern amongst LSAs. It was clear from my interviews with the LSAs and my observations around Willowbank, that the novice LSAs were afforded the same level of autonomy in their support of pupils as their colleagues who had been in post for considerably longer periods of time.

One other point to make here is that the Headteacher, Penny, had been in discussions with senior management at the Trust for some time about the issue of LSA recruitment, retention and pay. During the latter stages of my data collection I was aware that the Executive Leadership Team were seeking ways to address these problems, and that there were plans to lift the pay freeze after the summer holiday. Penny and Sandy were also trying to identify agency staff who showed potential for the specialised nature of the work, with the view to inviting them to apply for permanent positions. But a significant factor regarding the retention of new staff was that once the new starters had completed their corporate induction their identity as learners went largely unacknowledged by senior managers and many of the teachers. Yet it was a common concern for the LSAs at the school and the level of turnover of staff as a result did not surprise them.
It was not only new LSAs who felt the pressure of working in a special school, which brought with it such exceptional demands on the staff. There were particular stresses for those who worked with pupils who frequently resorted to extremely challenging behaviour, and it was not surprising that even the most experienced LSAs were not immune to the upset and strain such occurrences caused. On the few occasions I had witnessed behavioural incidents I found them very disturbing, despite the fact that the staff handled such occurrences as carefully and professionally as possible. The staff, who knew the pupils far better than I did, could not fail to be affected by these situations and in combination with the daily transfer of staff around school, it made for a stressful environment:

And you can see the stress, you can see it and it’s upsetting because everyone does an amazing job, everyone does … But when you know someone’s got potential, but you can see them just losing it … They’re burnt out far too quick, they’re burning out because they’ve had that many different staff coming in

Debbie (Level 3 LSA)

It was fascinating for me to hear the staff discuss the challenging demands of the job, but on numerous occasions they would turn to me, smile and say, ‘but I love this job!’ Two of the LSAs expressed what many felt:

I like working here, I do. Every day is different, every day’s a challenge and we do it for the kids … there’s staff that are going to stay and never leave – like me, and then staff that are going to be here for a few weeks and go

Helen (Level 3, LSA)

It’s not right for everybody. I love this job and I’ve been doing this sort of work in education - it’s been over 10 years

Karen (LSA)
Deputy Head Sandy summed up the appeal of the work, which appeared to offset the difficulties for many of the LSAs:

*Sometimes the medics have written off these young people and told parents that they’ll never do anything, ‘this person will never communicate’ and he’s actually got a language now and there’s no feeling like that is there? Nothing better in terms of job satisfaction, you can’t beat it; it’s a blooming hard job …*

Sandy (Deputy Head)

Headteacher Penny added “… but it’s those little things that keep you going on”.

Another aspect of working at Willowbank, which the LSAs appreciated was the opportunity they were given to attend courses and gain qualifications. It was also not unusual for an LSA at the school to embark on further study at college or university to develop the skills they had learnt during their time as an LSA. As I have already noted, several LSAs went on to become teachers, with a few returning to work at Willowbank. Another LSA had recently left the school to take up a place at university to train as a speech and language therapist. The senior managers at Willowbank were keen to develop employees who expressed an interest in a particular area, or who they identified as having potential and they accepted that the school lost staff because of this. Pip was full of praise for Penny and Sandy’s supportive attitude towards the development of LSAs, as well as noting the benefits for the school of their approach:

*So you might come back and you know the school already, you’re qualified in something, if you come back that’s going to be of benefit to them as you’re now more qualified than you were and you already know - because I think a lot of people come and don’t quite understand the population of students we have and they leave very quickly - whereas if I worked here for 10 years, and went off and studied to be a teacher or audiologist and come back with that qualification, I already understand the population we have and they know that, so it’s not as much of a risk, they know that you understand the school*

Pip (Level 3 LSA)
Whilst Pip articulates the benefits of this supportive approach, it is not without its drawbacks when taking into consideration the problems Willowbank was experiencing retaining staff. Liz, one of the senior teachers, raised this at the meeting in May with her colleagues and Sandy:

*There’s just such a high turnover of staff - LSAs leaving - partly because of the role and [also] young ambitious LSAs who want to move on and do other things*

Liz (senior teacher)

Sandy developed the point Liz had made:

*I have a tendency to want the ‘wow’ factor in an LSA in an interview, so I’m looking for ‘she’s dead interested, she wants to develop, she’s really clever’ if we get too many of those people [who] want to develop - we’ve got to be careful that we also need people who want to be LSAs and stick it out, and perhaps we’ve been recruiting a few too many ambitious people ... what we need to be mindful of is we’re also employing people who are just happy to be LSAs*

Sandy (Deputy Head)

As I reflected on these comments, I noted that it was true that there were instances when LSAs had left Willowbank in order to go to university to gain qualifications, having been supported to take formal qualifications whilst at the school. However, the majority of LSAs did not resign for reasons such as this. Many left after a short time in the post because they struggled with the work they were expected to do. These paraeducators had felt ill equipped to support pupils because of the lack of access they had to *informal* learning opportunities, such as shadowing experienced colleagues, observing their peers and the infrequency of on-the-job training by their class teachers.

### 5.6 Valuing staff

It will be clear that the work of these LSAs was challenging and demanding, and yet the amount of remuneration they received did not reflect this, nor did it recognise the extent of the mandatory studying they were expected to do. Whilst low pay was not
limited to the LSAs who worked at Willowbank, because with a starting salary of approximately £13,000 it was in line with what was (and is) paid nationally, however, the situation was keenly felt at Cedars Trust because there had been a pay freeze at the organisation for the previous two and a half years:

_There’s too much pressure on us with paperwork and stuff, they put us in dangerous situations, the pay is terrible for what we do and I just think people are getting fed up_

Carolyn (LSA)

The LSAs at Willowbank also felt they were not appreciated by senior managers at Cedars Trust, with many commenting that the stakeholders higher up the organisational structure were remote and unaware of the full extent of the work undertaken by LSAs:

_There is a hierarchy isn’t there and I think that’s what the morale was about to start with, the staff feel like they’re right at the bottom, me personally I feel that the LSAs should be at the top ‘cos they’re the heart of the school really, they’re the ones that are assisting the students, helping the students, so I think they should get more gratitude than what they do get_

Eleanor (LSA)

_I think on a classroom level LSAs are listened to, I don’t know how much further it goes. I think on an organisational level I don’t feel listened to_

Laura (Level 3 LSA)

The feeling that staff were not listened to was not far from many of the LSAs’ minds. Two years previously LSA contracts had been amended so that their working day ended at four o’clock and not half past three, because their thirty-minute lunchbreak became unpaid. The staff felt there had been scant consultation between them and the Trust’s Human Resources department and that the approach adopted by the Trust showed a lack of consideration of their views. Senior management emphasised that it was very rare for organisations to pay for lunch breaks and that in
financially straitened times the Trust needed to make savings, but LSAs felt this change disproportionately affected them, because of their already low rate of pay. In addition, the matter-of-fact way in which it was introduced made them feel undervalued by Cedars Trust. The organisation emphasised that the change to contracts was done as a financial measure, but it also happened at a time when LSAs had given feedback in a staff survey that they did not have enough time to complete all of their work. Although they were told the two events were not related many LSAs continued to be reluctant to provide feedback out of concern that they would be adversely affected. It was notable that the criticism was levelled, for the most part, at Cedars Trust senior management and not at either the Headteacher or Deputy Head, who were held in high regard by the vast majority of staff at the school.

The ramifications of the change to LSA contracts was still in evidence at the time of my fieldwork. For example, when I asked Sandy, the Deputy Head, if anything had happened recently that had particularly increased absences and resignations, she replied, “Well after the consultation, when the hours changed”. Ruth had also commented in her interview on the undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the organisation because:

> I know staff are reluctant to say they haven’t got enough time to do stuff because last time they said that their day extended by half an hour

Ruth (teacher)

There was another important outcome for the learning environment at the school as a result of the decisions made by these stakeholders, who were positioned within Willowbank’s productive system and yet remote from the day-to-day workings of the school. Senior LSA Jackie highlighted the situation in her reference to the LSAs’ contract change, when she said the lack of time staff had reduced the opportunities for sharing best practice:
We do it, but I don’t think we do enough of it because of time. But we’re scared of saying that because last time we said there’s not enough time we got more hours!

Jackie (senior LSA)

5.7 Conclusion

The minefield that the senior teachers navigated in their reactive reallocation of staff was not to be envied and was readily acknowledged by everyone as being far from ideal for pupils and staff. And what came through clearly was the priority all of the staff gave to ensuring the learning of the pupils was disrupted as little as possible. At such times many pupils were supported by their class teachers for extended periods of time as these professionals had to forego working in their supernumerary capacity. However, the resultant lack of the availability of teachers to work with their LSAs during pupil sessions, meant that the learning and development needs of these vital members of the workforce went unrecognised for extended periods of time.

The LSAs who worked in classes where they worked with students two-to-one (which was the minority of staff) had access to on-the-job learning even when there were reduced numbers of staff, since the needs of the pupil dictated LSAs would always be working with a colleague or the class teacher. The impact of the lack of LSA resource on the opportunities for learning was also less for those LSAs who worked in classes where some group sessions were possible. By working in a group setting, albeit for short periods of time, these paraeducators could build up their knowledge of students other than their own, and in addition were able to observe the practice of their colleagues and share ideas.

At times of reduced LSA resource the main focus of the managers at Willowbank was firmly on ensuring educational support was available, and this was clearly an understandable priority. However, what was also evident was that there was little acknowledgement of the need for LSAs to have regular opportunities for non-formal learning, including at times when staffing levels were less than optimum. The lack of provision of on-the-job learning for novice LSAs, in particular, led to frequent resignations and as a result the problem of staff shortages continued.
Hattie and Mary

Mary is ten years old and has come to Willowbank from Sparrowfield, a special primary school nearby. Mary has a rare genetic disorder that has caused multiple learning difficulties including developmental problems with her speech, which means that she is unable to communicate using her voice. Mary’s genetic disorder causes hyperactivity and aggression towards herself and others.

At Sparrowfield School Mary has learnt a few British Sign Language signs, but her ability to communicate is extremely limited. When Mary joins Willowbank she will be in Class C with senior teacher Louise, who is a qualified teacher of the deaf and a highly skilled sign language communicator. Louise has assigned Hattie as Mary’s keyworker and she will provide Mary with her one-to-one educational support. Hattie has been an LSA at the school for six years and is extremely proficient at sign language, having shown an aptitude for it when she took the mandatory course when
she joined the school. Louise has already met Mary, her parents and Sparrowfield school staff during the assessment visit. Before Mary starts at Willowbank LSA Hattie goes to Sparrowfield for a transition visit to meet Mary and to observe her in the junior school setting. Hattie notes that Mary is unable to remain in the classroom for any length of time, frequently going to the classroom door and pointing at the symbol for ‘Leave’ that has been taped there. Hattie is told that when Mary goes on trips, two learning support assistants from Sparrowfield take her out in a large buggy because they do not want to risk her walking, in case she becomes anxious and throws herself on the floor, bites herself or becomes aggressive with people around her.

Back at Willowbank, Louise and Hattie talk about Mary’s individual education plan and her targets for her first few weeks at the school. This is the third time in her six years at the school that Hattie has been assigned to work in Louise’s class and she is very pleased because Louise is enthusiastic and has high expectations of her staff and pupils. Hattie also thinks highly of the other LSAs in Louise’s class because they are very supportive of each other and care about the progress of all of the students in the class:

“My class are very good and if you say, ‘this is what we’re doing and this is why’ they’ll say ‘ok’ and it’s very consistent. You can just see that everyone’s singing off the same hymn sheet”

When Mary arrives at Willowbank she is initially given a classroom to herself while she adjusts to her new environment and becomes familiar with Hattie, Louise and other members of the class team. The first few weeks are challenging and stressful for Hattie because Mary runs out of her classroom and along the school’s maze of corridors, going in and out of classrooms, pulling out the contents of any boxes she finds. Equally worrying for Hattie is that if other pupils are in her way Mary pulls their hair, with the risk that those pupils will become distressed. When Hattie intervenes, Mary throws herself on the floor and aggressively bites herself.

In order to build a relationship with Mary, Hattie initiates a brushing routine at the start of every day. Gently brushing Mary’s head, arms and hands not only calms Mary, but also signals that the school day has begun. For the first term Mary is
unable to sit still for more than a few minutes during this activity, but as she gets to know and trust Hattie she is able to stay still for longer, and as time goes on Mary anticipates the brushing routine and enjoys it. Building an effective relationship between Hattie and Mary is important not only for Mary, who needs to be able to trust and have confidence in her LSA, but also for Hattie if she is to understand and equip herself to effectively support the educational, emotional and medical needs of her pupil. Developing such an understanding does not happen quickly and even after working with Mary for many months, Hattie comments that as an LSA “every day is a learning curve”.

Hattie has previously completed the Autism course run by Cedars Trust for its staff, and is part of the LSA Autism group at Willowbank. Because many of Mary’s learning difficulties are similar to those experienced by individuals with autistic spectrum conditions, Mary attends the ‘Autism cafés’. These meetings are organised by Debbie, a Level 3 LSA, who is the school’s highly skilled and conscientious Autism ‘champion’. Mary finds these cafés very helpful:

“Because it’s hard when you’ve got a situation every day, so you need fresh eyes. It also serves as a reminder, because I do have high expectations of Mary and sometimes I need to be reminded she does have her [syndrome] and she does have this and she does have that - it’s not like she’s not listening, she does have all these difficulties as well”

Louise and Hattie set targets around communication from the first day Mary joins the school. At the start of each day, Hattie prepares the resources for Mary’s communication lesson, which centres on the ‘What’s in the bag?’ activity. Hattie puts a spoon, fork and ball into a large cloth bag. When Mary pulls one of the objects out Hattie says the word, demonstrates the sign language sign for it and waits for Mary to repeat the sign back. Hattie also talks to Mary about what the object is used for. Not only does this activity help Mary to recognise an object and learn its sign, the action of reaching in and taking something out of the bag helps to develop her fine motor skills, and reinforces activities she is working on with the Occupational Therapist, Vicky. As the term progresses Hattie decides to substitute pictures for the objects in the bag, and owing to Hattie’s knowledgeable support Mary will have learnt one hundred and fifty signs by the end of the school year.
Hattie goes on to teach Mary to link four signs together and consequently she is able to have two way signed conversations with Hattie, the class staff and her parents. Hattie is an LSA who uses her initiative and draws on the wealth of experience she has gained during her six years at the school. In a recent observation of her morning communication session with Mary, one of the senior teachers at the school judged the session to be ‘outstanding’. Hattie said afterwards:

“It’s always thinking of your long-term goal, and what you want to achieve. And so looking at the short-term I think ‘right, she’s got that, what we want to achieve in the long-term is that – so how can we move her on?’ Then at the end of the day I say to Louise ‘I tried this and this worked really well’ and that’s what the ‘Next Steps’ recording is for”.

In the summer term, Hattie speaks to Louise about her idea of making the ‘What’s in the bag?’ pictures smaller, as eventually she would like to replace the pictures with words. Louise smiles and says, “go for it!” The improvement in Mary’s communication is apparent to everyone at school and Hattie’s pride in her student is tangible:

“She’s just learnt so much; she’s developed in every single aspect of her processing, she understands a ‘who’ question, a ‘where’ question and a ‘what’ question and she initiates a conversation. It makes me feel a little bit emotional. Her communication is massively extended about the world, about shopping, about what she wants to buy. One day she just wanted a chat and signed ‘more, more, more’ and I said, ‘what more talking?’ and she basically just wanted to have a chat”

Mary also has a weekly session at school with Vicky, the Occupational Therapist. During these sessions Hattie watches carefully to see “how they did things and what they are aiming for, so I would think how Mary and me can achieve it - you just observe what people do and you learn from it.”

It’s now mid-July and Class C are having their regular Thursday afternoon staff meeting. Hattie is animatedly telling her colleagues about the day she has had with Mary. She reminds the class team that over the course of the year she has been working with Mary to develop the necessary skills to go shopping, a weekly activity
that all Class C pupils do every Thursday. Hattie and Mary have spent a lot of time talking about shopping, including using a story board and watching a video of what happens in a shop and how you pay for what you have chosen. Mary hasn’t been going with the other pupils in her class to shop at the large Tesco’s a few miles down the road, because the size of the store, the number of customers and travelling on the minibus with her peers would have caused her a great deal of anxiety. Instead Hattie and another LSA have been driving Mary to a small shop nearer to school, with the large buggy in the boot just in case Mary becomes upset and refuses to walk. But today Hattie decided that she would take Mary on the minibus with the rest of the class to the large Tesco’s and take her around the shop on her own, without the buggy. And so this morning Hattie spent an hour and a half preparing Mary for the trip, explaining that Mary and Hattie will get the minibus with the rest of the class and go into the big Tesco’s together, where Mary will be able to choose her favourite cheese. Once Mary has chosen her cheese, with Hattie’s help, she will pay for it at the automatic checkout, and then Hattie and Mary will get on the minibus with her classmates and return to school. And this is exactly what happened. And so, to the cheers of her Class C colleagues, Hattie said “today me and Mary went shopping on our own, she was wonderful”.

6.1 Introduction

Whilst I have concentrated on a specific LSA, Hattie, and her pupil, Mary, the scenes described in the preceding vignette capture the essence of many of the day-to-day educational activities and relationships at Willowbank. Moreover, my portrayal of the learning difficulties experienced by Mary illustrates the wide-ranging demands on LSAs and the extensive knowledge required to deliver appropriate educational support to pupils with such complex learning needs, who these LSAs support one-to-one. My intention in this chapter is to provide a rich insight into the expectations of LSAs, such as Hattie, and the challenges that face them in their daily lives at Willowbank school, whilst also enabling the perspectives of this important group of staff to emerge. And crucial to addressing my research question, the findings discussed in this chapter will illustrate the fundamental importance of providing an appropriate learning environment for these educators, whilst simultaneously illuminating the complexities of providing opportunities for workplace learning at the school.

6.2 Initial training

Observing the daily activities at Willowbank and from talking to staff, it was clear that from the first day of their employment the LSAs at the school found themselves on a steep learning trajectory. Their introduction to employment at Cedars Trust began with the in-house induction training, which is compulsory for all new staff and completed prior to working with the students:

We had a full week of training, so we did 3 days of behaviour management and then we met HR, Speech and Language, we had disability training, autism awareness and things like that

Carolyn (LSA)

Following the suggestion by two senior LSAs at Willowbank, Cedars Trust had recently reduced the time allocated to the induction programme from two weeks to one, so that staff could have further training expressly tailored to their place of work (that is, school, college or residence). Staff were also required to complete on-line
training modules in areas such as first aid, safeguarding and hygiene. After the 
generic one-week induction LSAs started working one-to-one with their students and 
attended the school specific new starter training that took place during eight twilight 
sessions, scheduled over several weeks. The two senior LSAs based the content of 
the training on feedback they gathered from new starters and from their colleagues 
around the school. The Headteacher and Deputy Head, who had acknowledged that 
the Trust’s induction course was not meeting the needs of new LSAs, unhesitatingly 
gave responsibility for the content of the school’s induction sessions to the senior 
LSAs to organise, because they trusted them to arrange training that was pertinent 
for the new starters. The Willowbank induction focused on the specific learning 
needs of these educators at the school, for example tuition on the organisation’s 
computer-based system ‘Exchange’, used for recording pupils’ Individual Education 
Plans, targets and lesson plans, progress, next steps and achievements. Other 
sessions provided more detailed information than that given on the generic Trust 
induction and covered topics such as autism, multisensory impairment and hearing 
difficulties. These sessions were delivered by the Level 3 LSAs who had been 
selected by Penny, the Headteacher, in discussion with Sandy the Deputy Head, as 
subject ‘champions’. The Autism champion, Debbie, demonstrated the thought she 
had put into her twilight session with the novice LSAs. Additionally, her comments 
show the level of trust the senior LSAs, and school leaders, had in the champions to 
design their training. However, there was also recognition by the senior LSAs that 
they needed to collect feedback from attendees to monitor how the sessions were 
received, in case changes were needed:
Now I have an autism awareness slot, there are Level 3 specialists – there’s the visual impairment and MSI, Judy, hearing impairment, Pip, and then there’s me... I do my training a bit differently - cos sometimes when you’re sat there, it doesn’t matter how big the group, you’re shown a PowerPoint and you’re telling people, ‘this, this, this and this’, ‘this is what you need to do, this is what you have to do’ - I think when you’re working a full day and having training, you’re shutting down, you’re getting tired, so mine’s a bit different, it’s a bit of a ‘let’s have a bit of a discussion, what do you know, what don’t you know’ and using examples. So it was a bit more fun and the feedback was a bit more positive [for example] ‘it was the first one where I didn’t feel tired or [where] I had to remember everything’. And I thought that’s what I want it to be, I don’t want it to be daunting or tiring

Debbie (Level 3 LSA)

As well as attendance at the in-school twilight sessions, new LSAs were also contractually obliged to study for the British Sign Language Level 1 qualification every week for 40 weeks. An LSA talked about this course and expressed her dissatisfaction with the situation she found herself in:

One thing I don’t like is with the BSL I have to stay behind after work for an hour and a half unpaid, I don’t pay for the course, but if I leave I have to pay it back or if you fail you have to pay it, but it’s mandatory in your contract. I’ve spoken about it cos I don’t think it’s fair and it’s just ‘get on with it, cos everybody does it’

Carolyn (LSA)

The preceding comment illustrates the paradoxical approach to staff learning at Willowbank, in which senior management at the school made strenuous efforts to provide an environment conducive to employee learning and development, for example by appointing disability area champions, but which often fell short owing to internal and external constraints. For example, the contractual obligation for LSAs to attend the BSL course was one imposed on all staff who worked with students by the Executive Leadership Team at Cedars Trust. The logic behind this was clear and was illustrated in my vignette when it was apparent that Hattie’s expertise in signing was a key factor in the rapid development of Mary’s communication skills. But what was
unclear was the rationale behind the leadership team’s stipulation that LSAs should attend the course in their own - unpaid - time. Whilst it could be argued that on the successful completion of the course LSAs had a portable and nationally recognised qualification, the expectation that these educators gave up their own time, after an already demanding day, was somewhat puzzling. And, as expressed by Carolyn, the requirement for staff to put in additional unpaid hours was not welcome because they already felt a salary of £13,000 was insufficient remuneration for the demanding job they did. As Helen, a Level 3 LSA noted, “I could get paid the same working at Marks and Spencer’s”.

Willowbank’s inconsistent stance toward LSA learning was also apparent when new LSAs, with just one week’s training behind them, embarked on their work as educators of pupils with very complex learning difficulties. Although the organisation endeavoured to provide sufficient information for new LSAs to grasp the fundamentals of their role and equip them to begin working with students, this provision fell far short of what these recent starters actually required to be able to take on their role with any level of confidence. Willowbank staff universally accepted that the knowledge and skills needed by LSAs cannot be learnt quickly and that a substantial amount of experiential learning was necessary to equip them to deliver such highly specialised support. Consequently, a balance needed to be struck for new starters between training derived from a formal setting and the acquisition of knowledge that came from hands-on experience whilst being monitored by a knowledgeable colleague.

One long serving LSA remarked on the advantage of the recently revised induction programme:

_I think when you’re doing it without contact with the students, there’s no context - particularly if you’ve not really worked in this kind of environment before - it’s very hard to put what you’re learning into a context, so if you’re actually already working and then you’re getting those bits of training, it might be more helpful_

Laura (Level 3 LSA)
This is a highly relevant point and the introduction of the school-based induction training was welcomed at Willowbank for the very reason the Laura gave. And yet from my involvement at the school it was clear that a balance needed to be struck between enabling LSAs to understand the context of the circumstances in which they work, whilst also providing sufficient time and support for them to acclimatise to their workplace and to the exceptional demands of the job. It is worth reflecting on Fuller and Unwin’s (2004a) expansive-restrictive model at this point. Even though their framework was initially applied to research on apprenticeships the construct is relevant to workers more widely and whilst Willowbank did not have an apprenticeship scheme, it was clear that novice LSAs were not afforded the status of newcomers who gradually moved from the periphery to the position of a full worker. Although the lack of knowledge and experience of new LSAs was recognised in everyday discussions, very little was done to guide them on-the-job from the first day they joined the school after the one-week Trust induction course, and therefore this group were expected to work autonomously with only one week’s training behind them. Indeed, experienced colleagues appreciated that new staff should have close supervision from the outset, but at the same time acknowledged that any opportunities for on-the-job guidance were rare. In fact, there was a high degree of disquiet amongst staff at Willowbank about the expectations placed on new LSAs, and the lack of proper workplace support afforded these novices:

*It’s a very challenging job and new staff are thrown in so much at the deep end that they are overwhelmed*

Pip (Level 3 LSA)

*After the induction training I think they still need an awful lot of training - just around the individual-ness of it really - the individual students, because the training is quite general*

Cerys (senior teacher)

Furthermore, Pip’s point about staff being overwhelmed is important, because the way in which they were conferred autonomy caused LSAs significant stress and dissatisfaction, counter to findings on the subject in the literature. Indeed, as my
previous chapter illustrated many new LSAs were resigning after a short time in the job and there was a high level of sickness absence amongst the paraeducators at the school.

6.3 Formal training culture

It was shortly after the school Christmas break when I had recently started my data collection at Willowbank when I saw Laura, a Level 3 LSA, in the staff room and asked if I could interview her in the next couple of months. She replied that she would be happy to help, but could our conversation wait until much later in the year, when she would have completed her two-year Diploma in Disability and Habilitation. And so, it was in the summer when we sat down and talked, by which time I had spoken to numerous members of staff and been carrying out my research at the school for over six months. As I listened to what Laura had to say, her words crystallised in my mind much of what I had heard and seen at Willowbank since my initial approach to her, and brought the paradox of the learning environment at Willowbank into sharp focus:

*I think we’re pretty good at it – we may not have other things – but I think we are good at training our staff. I think we’re good at putting people forward and I think we’re good at encouraging people that they need to be trained and I think there is support for it here, because I think there is a lot going on. There’s also an awful lot of people doing stuff off their own bat, but I think there is a culture that we should be training, we should be learning, we should be pushing ourselves forward, we should be looking at not staying in the same place, but what’s new, what’s innovative*

Laura (Level 3 LSA)

Laura’s observations are noteworthy for several reasons. She commented that the organisation is “good at training our staff” and yet what she was referring to was the importance placed on *formal* approaches to learning that prevailed at Willowbank.

Ruth, one of the teachers, discussed how the compulsory training contributed to the attitude of LSAs:
I definitely think that until recently the attitude of some people – it’s their job and they wouldn’t [seek out training] - with the compulsory training now, you have to do the training, you have to have the NVQ Teaching Assistant and you have to have your BSL Level 1, it was quite lackadaisical before ... I think the push on qualifications is helping, it’s just helping a new attitude amongst people

Ruth (formerly a Willowbank LSA, now a teacher)

The point about attitude is significant, as the stipulation that LSAs would gain an NVQ and pass the BSL examination did create a culture where these educators accepted that they would have to spend time studying. Yet in my conversations with staff (throughout my time at the school, not only during this research) many acknowledged the lack of relevance of the NVQ for their classroom practice (Martin and Alborz, 2014), but no one questioned how this time for learning might be more productively spent. In fact, when I raised the subject of NVQs with Penny, her reply was surprising:

*We want people to get an NVQ – I can’t stand it myself because in actual fact you’re not learning anything, you’re telling them what you do and writing about it, it’s about being literate and IT literate and that kind of thing, more than learning how to do your job - all it does is evidence what they do*

Penny (Headteacher)

I reflected at length about the continued insistence by Cedars Trust that LSAs complete the NVQ when it was of limited benefit to staff who work with pupils with complex learning disabilities, and particularly given the views of the Headteacher on the matter. Of course, one element is that local authorities equate NVQ attainment with quality of educational support, and in such competitive times special schools are unlikely to risk their staff seeming less well equipped than other organisations, given the freely available information published in Local Offer documentation on local authority websites. Furthermore, the organisation’s stance on NVQs had a positive effect on the workforce, since it signalled to LSAs that Willowbank saw professional development as important, thus creating an expansive learning climate in which many LSAs felt confident in approaching the Headteacher and Deputy to
ask for support to attend courses, which they themselves had identified as relevant to their work.

Collette, a former LSA who had been at Willowbank for seven years, brought additional perspectives to the topic. Collette had been appointed to a new role as the school’s assistive technologist eighteen months previously and told me that when she came into the job she knew she wanted to develop:

*I knew I didn't want to be an LSA forever, and couldn’t afford to be, quite frankly...I think I was one of the first cohort of LSAs who showed that initiative - in respect of saying ‘I want more than this’*

Collette (Assistive Technologist and former LSA)

Although she acknowledged her own personal work aspirations, she felt that the pressure on LSAs to gain qualifications was not always justified. She articulated quite strongly that if LSAs were working optimally and delivering what was expected that should be deemed as an acceptable level of performance. Collette’s view was that:

*People are asked to do more qualifications because we want to be seen as a Centre of Excellence*

The opinion expressed by Collette was not without foundation (and Cedars Trust five-year strategy is something I discuss in chapter seven). But it was also clear to me that Penny and Sandy wanted their LSA workforce to be knowledgeable so they could support their pupils effectively. Two years previously these senior managers had selected five LSAs to attend the recently developed and nationally recognised ‘Intervenor’ training, run by the charity Sense, which was one of very few available on the topic of multi-sensory impairments (MSI). The course had also gained university accreditation and feedback in the disability sector had been very positive. Completion of the five-day course, passing two assignments and attendance at sessions with a mentor, provided attendees with a Level Four qualification (equivalent to the first year of an undergraduate degree). Having identified this qualification, Penny and Sandy planned to send a few LSAs on the Intervenor course
at regular intervals. However, the emerging trend for local authorities to stipulate (in the recently introduced Education, Health and Care Plans) that LSAs supporting pupils with MSI must have the Intervenor qualification, resulted in the number of LSAs from Willowbank attending the course being substantially increased. Over the course of two years some twenty LSAs had gained the qualification, at considerable financial cost to the organisation.

I reflected on the Intervenors in terms of a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998) and considered how local authorities that were removed from the day-to-day running of the school, but were stakeholders in Willowbank’s educational provision, exerted influence on the learning - and subsequent practice - of this sizeable community within Willowbank. Firstly, an outside community (a local authority) had identified the obligatory level of competence for another community (LSAs) and specified that the members of this community must gain a specific qualification, although there had been no collaboration on the matter with members of the school. Furthermore, although the senior managers at Willowbank had already identified the benefits of the Intervenor course, they were not able to challenge local authorities on the mandate, because if the school did not sponsor LSAs to gain the Intervenor qualification Willowbank would be unable to take pupils with MSI and would lose the associated funding. Whilst Penny and Sandy had already set in motion learning provision that would go on to influence the “negotiated level of competence” (Wenger, 1998) for this group of LSAs, it was clear that the Intervenor stipulation by local authorities had resulted in a hastening of attendance on the courses, and consequently an increase in the speed with which the practice of these LSAs evolved.

As I used a Community of Practice lens to further reflect on my findings, additional observations of interest emerged. For example, Penny appointed one of the Intervenors, Judy, (a Level 3 LSA) to become the MSI ‘champion’ and part of her remit was to organise meetings for the LSAs who were studying for, or who had gained, the Intervenor qualification. In this way, the Headteacher had initiated a learning forum for this specific group of staff, but as time progressed it became clear that a Community of Practice was emerging. In interviews those LSAs who had gained, or were in the processing of gaining, their Intervenor qualification defined
their practice, and identity, through membership of this group. This was particularly
striking when, during interviews or in conversations around Willowbank, LSAs
would state “I’m an Intervenor”, thus distilling experiences and meanings of their
practice into a reified form (Jewson, 2007).

Furthermore, it was clear from my conversations with staff that the learning they
brought from the course was beneficial to their practice:

*You learn and you think ‘I was actually doing that right, but can we do it better?’*

Karen (LSA)

*I found it very helpful, it was stuff I was already doing, but it was giving it context
and taking it a step further … I feel it just took my practice on that step further*

Laura (Level 3 LSA)

*That course really explained why, what we were doing, why you do things and it put
you in the position, where possible, of that student so they would blindfold you and
walk you round school and push you around in a wheelchair blindfolded and things
and it really made you think more and obviously, they gave you the strategies to
support the students to go with it*

Pip (Level 3 LSA)

Sandy animatedly told me:

*When some of the staff did their Intervenor training they were very excited about
having to do case studies and talk about individual students and they learnt a lot
from each other, so they came to us and said they were really excited about it
because they found it really useful and since then Penny [Headteacher] organised
two information café style meetings where the learning support assistants were in
their class groups and they just talk about their student to the other staff and just
share that information with them, and they all loved that. They had five minutes each
and we had to shout above the noise to get them to change*

Sandy (Deputy Head)
The education of LSAs who work with pupils with MSI was only half of the picture at Willowbank. Given that many of the pupils have Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) or, like Mary, have syndromes that produce behaviours similar to those associated with ASD, the Head and Deputy Head recognised that these LSAs required additional training to develop their practice. There was also the possibility that local authorities would start to insist, in Education, Health and Care Plans, for evidence that LSAs supporting pupils with ASD had additional specialist training, as had already occurred with staff supporting pupils with MSI. However, a longstanding problem was that a suitable course on autism spectrum disorders had proved elusive, and the solution to the absence of relevant training was that a senior member of Cedars Trust (Kristine), was given the responsibility of designing and delivering a course for LSAs and care staff across the Trust.

*I’ve done my Autism. I did it here with Kristine, who’s done her Masters or something, and can teach us now. She marked it and then it was all sent off and marked by an independent body. The course was seven months, we had to meet with Kristine every three weeks, I think it was, and then all the work was done at home, we had nine assignments to do … I learnt quite a lot from it*

Helen (Level 3 LSA)

Having established the provision of both Intervenor and Autism training, LSAs were given the choice of which course they wanted to do, and for some the decision was influenced by considerations unrelated to the needs of the pupil they supported at the time:

*I’m not sure if the Autism course is accredited yet and I don’t want to put loads of time and effort in if I can’t take it anywhere else – I prefer the Autism side to the Intervenor - so I’m waiting to see if the Autism course will be accredited. I am being pushed [to decide], but I don’t want to do it until I know. I’m all for doing extra work if I get something for it*

Carolyn (LSA)
The Intervenors owe the organisation if they leave within two years – the Autism don’t owe anything at all, because it’s in-house - it’s a bit hard because people are saying ‘I don’t want to do that [Intervenor] course, because if I leave I’ve got to pay the money back for doing it’

Debbie (Level 3 LSA)

Whilst it was straightforward to understand the reasoning behind the LSAs’ rationale, the stipulation by Cedars Trust resulted in some LSAs gaining qualifications in SEND that were not related to the students they were supporting. This led to some LSAs not being fully equipped to support their pupils. Whilst the Headteacher could allocate LSAs to the ‘appropriate’ pupils in the following academic year, the caveat by the Trust risked a higher proportion of LSAs opting to take the Autism course since it carried no financial penalties. This would result in an insufficient number of paraeducators able to work with pupils with MSI.

As with the Intervenor group, Penny had appointed a Level 3 LSA, Debbie, as the Autism ‘champion’ to lead an Autism learning group. This LSA’s approach was praised by many interviewees because they liked her interactive style at the ‘Autism cafes’ she ran:

*She delivers training, every four weeks, at half three till four. They’re very good. It makes you think*

Helen (Level 3 LSA)

*She did a sensory one about how children with autism feel being touched and response back to that was fabulous, everyone thought it was grand, they don’t think things like that - about how the kids feel - the Autism one is very good*

Eleanor (LSA)

It was interesting to observe that despite the concerted efforts of the Autism champion to encourage LSAs to attend the Autism cafes, and the acknowledgement and high praise by her peers of the help she provided, there was not an Autism “identity” amongst LSAs, as I had noted with the Intervenors. It emerged that those
LSAs who attended the in-house Autism course did not discuss it in the same way as their colleagues who had been on the Sense Intervenor course and in my discussions around the school it emerged that having an externally accredited Level 4 qualification played a role in how staff felt. The Intervenor LSAs had a sense of pride in their achievement, as well as having had the opportunity to share experiences externally with individuals who worked in different organisations. I was told after my data collection had finished that Cedars Trust was seeking to have the in-house Autism course accredited (although it will be at a lower level than the Intervenor course, probably a Level 2 qualification) and this may have affected how the LSAs viewed the training. One other feature, which struck me as significant, was the form the in-house Autism training took:

When we did the Autism training, we never had a book, we never got given anything ... it was a PowerPoint and [she] just stood in front of it, reading off the PowerPoint

Debbie (Level 3 LSA)

The learning experience of the LSAs who had been on the Autism course was markedly different from that of those who had attended the Intervenor training, because this latter group had been exposed to highly interactive and collaborative encounters with the other attendees and a group bond had emerged from very early on. This was continued beyond the end of the formal Intervenor training when members organised meetings for attendees from within and outside Willowbank school, and so experiences and feedback were shared more broadly than solely between the Intervenors at the school. Gaining these broader perspectives equipped these LSAs to develop and improve their classroom practice.

6.4 How LSAs approach training

As I analysed my findings I noted that Willowbank’s LSAs completed the formal training as they were required to do, but many of them did not seek to extend their knowledge through less formal means. This was even the case when opportunities were provided within their working hours. This was particularly noticeable with the Autism LSAs and I set out to follow up my thoughts on the subject. I had noted that despite the diligent and impressive work of the Autism champion, attendance at her
Autism cafes had declined and I was told that this was as a result of the high rate of behavioural incidents that staff were having to deal with. When this was mentioned to me I had assumed the problem was because of the time it takes staff to complete the relevant behavioural incident forms on Exchange and that this activity restricted the amount of time the LSAs had at the end of the day to attend the Autism meeting. However, the situation was more complicated than I had imagined. Debbie explained the reasons to me and also why she felt it was at such times the Autism café was so important:

*It’s hard [to get them to come] and I know the ones along the corridor, the motivation is a bit low and the morale low and they need a bit of a boost and Helen did go down and say ‘it’s the Autism drop in and there’s cake! Come on’ and they were just like ‘Mm’ [i.e. not interested]. They’re having a hard time, they’ve got challenging students at the minute and they’re burnt out, but if they came for the little [bit of] fun - it is work - but it is fun and it might give them a bit of a boost. Cos sometimes when you’ve got a challenging student and it’s recurring every day you don’t see the other things anymore. So people just need that break away and people need to debrief and get it out and that’s another idea of the drop-in session - it’s for you to vent ‘I enjoyed that activity and I’m going to take it into my class because I felt like no-one’s listening to me, but actually I do know what I’m talking about’ - it’s to make staff feel a bit empowered really.*

Debbie (Level 3 LSA)

Given Debbie’s words I was surprised that she had resisted the suggestion by both Penny and Sandy to have attendance at her Autism cafes made compulsory, but she felt strongly that she did not want LSAs to be forced to attend “*because once you do that to them the enthusiasm goes*”. Despite the decline in attendance, Debbie was insistent she did not want LSAs to be told to go along. Debbie’s attempts to help her peers were inspiring and I was reminded of another discussion we had, when she had produced booklets to mark World Autism Awareness Day. She had left them on tables in the staff rooms for people to look at, and yet they remained untouched.
The irony was that shortly afterwards an LSA stopped Debbie in the corridor and asked her about an autism website address that she wanted to look at. Straightaway Debbie returned to the staff room and fetched one of the booklets to give her colleague, as the website was mentioned in it. The LSA commented that she had spotted the booklets on the table in the staffroom, but was not prepared to read it while she was having her lunch. Debbie replied that she could have picked up the booklet and taken it to read later. Debbie, who was rather crestfallen, told me that she understood LSAs did not like work encroaching on their breaks, but could not understand why they did not make some effort to look at the booklets when she had gone to so much trouble to provide them with information that would help their understanding of the difficulties experienced by their students and the booklet included suggestions, from different sources, to inform their practice.

But it was not only Debbie’s endeavours that went unnoticed. I had observed that training course leaflets, which had been put in staff communal areas by Penny and
Sandy, were routinely left in a pile on the tables in the staffroom, seemingly overlooked for weeks on end. It was also noticeable that the information board in the staff dining room was covered with posters, which were soon overlaid with other notices. The visibility of leaflets and posters around school, which related to staff development suggested a strongly expansive atmosphere toward employee development. It was only by my observing the behaviour of the LSAs and noticing the way leaflets went untouched and posters unread that a more comprehensive understanding came to light. Given the nature of the work the LSAs did, the thirty-minute break they had for their lunch was an oasis of calm in an otherwise demanding day, and whilst they might chat about a situation that had arisen that morning and talk to others about it over their sandwiches, there was little appetite for reading posters or leaflets. Indeed, by the time I had finished my fieldwork I concluded that if the posters and leaflets had never made an appearance in staff rooms they would not have been missed.

The difficulties Debbie had experienced, including her thoughts about not wanting to make the Autism café compulsory, came to mind some months later when I had my discussion with Laura, the Level 3 LSA and newly qualified Disability and Habilitation specialist. What emerged from my conversations with these two experienced and knowledgeable LSAs were their efforts to overcome an attitude of resistance from their peers and provide learning experiences that they could easily relate to their pupils. Laura and I were talking about how she planned to train staff and share her newly acquired expertise, and she was clearly concerned how best to approach the subject, “I don’t want it to be formal, because once it gets formal everyone freezes up”. When I reflected on this comment the numerous conversations I had at Willowbank came to mind, when LSAs had told me of their struggles during their own school days and that they left school straight after their GCSEs. It was apparent that many had concerns about their ability to return to studying, as Pip, the Level 3 LSA, noted:
It’s your academic skills and if you’ve worked here and not done any for 10 years to think about writing something ... that can be difficult because obviously, we don’t academically write things here ... but if you’re going on the Intervenor or the autism course both require a good standard of academic work and that’s really intimidating sometimes

Pip (Level 3 LSA)

Indeed, aware that many of the LSAs were particularly nervous about writing their assignments Sandy, the Deputy Head, had organised two sessions after school so she could help them understand how to approach and structure their written work.

Given what Laura had said to me, I should not have been surprised that she was considering how best to engage LSAs, given the lack of confidence many had in more formal approaches to learning. My attention was caught just over a week later as I was signing out of school at four o’clock and I heard Laura and eight LSAs coming along the corridor. Half of the LSAs wore blindfolds, were holding canes and being led by their sighted partners, Laura was coaching the group and offering advice when questions were raised. Laura had offered the session to those who felt they would benefit from her guidance and it was clear that this non-formal learning session, with its focus on practical experience, was proving to be highly effective for all those involved.

What is noteworthy from the examples and comments I have shared here is the acknowledgement by the paraeducators of the importance of non-formal approaches to learning for informing the practice of LSAs and the difficulties many of them experienced when faced with formal learning situations, and yet for almost the entire time the LSAs were working with their students they had no access to work based training. Of equal note is that in their discussions with me the lack of non-formal learning opportunities did not feature in the LSAs’ assessment of Willowbank’s learning environment, which the overwhelming number of staff stated was highly supportive. The incongruity of opinions, whereby LSAs praised the availability of qualifications in one breath and yet criticised the lack of guidance in the classroom the next, highlights the culture of the value placed on learning activities away from
the workplace and did little to facilitate a change in approach at the school to provide more opportunities for situational learning.

6.5 School leaders’ attitude to LSA learning

It will be apparent from what I have discussed that the Headteacher and Deputy Head wanted LSAs at Willowbank to have participated in a number of formal learning opportunities, in order to inform and improve their classroom practice at the school. This approach is not typical of the stance illustrated in the literature, which reports that provision of training for LSAs, of any sort, is meagre. As a result, by the time an LSA had worked at Willowbank for two years they had completed BSL training, achieved an NVQ in Teaching and Learning, and completed the Intervenor or Autism course. What also emerged from my findings was the active role Penny and Sandy played in developing individual LSAs and seeking out those who they felt had a strength, or an interest, in a particular area. For example, Ruth, who had until recently been a senior LSA, qualified as a teacher following completion of her Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector (DTLLS) after the Headteacher and Deputy Head had noted her ability with pupils, along with feedback from her teacher about Ruth’s proactive interest in the pupils’ Individual Education Plans and longer term goals. Based on their observations, Penny approached Ruth about undertaking a qualification in teaching and Ruth grabbed the opportunity with both hands. Since September she had been responsible for a class of three students who all required two-to-one support and so Ruth was also managing six LSAs.

When Ruth and I spoke, she animatedly told me about all the learning and development opportunities she had been given at Willowbank since starting at the school only five years earlier (Level 1, 2 and 3 in British Sign Language, NVQ Level 3 in Teaching and Learning, the Intervenor qualification and the DTLLS). Ruth was clearly grateful to Penny and Sandy for the opportunities she had been given, and had diligently and gladly taken them. Ruth gave me a broad smile as she told me, “apart from my GCSEs I didn’t have any qualifications until I started here!”

Other LSAs told me similar stories. For example Pip, who had funded herself to do an early childhood studies degree (that she started whilst working in Cedar’s Trust residential houses and continued when she joined Willowbank), had written her
dissertation on working with hearing impaired children and she had been appointed as the Level 3 hearing impairment ‘champion’:

I’ve always been interested in hearing impairment and I’d spent a bit of time with Gilly [Senior Audiologist] anyway [at the suggestion of the Headteacher] and I went on a course at the Ear Foundation to do with hearing aid devices in education … so it is encouraged, they want you to develop, so they’re very nurturing of what you think you want to do in the future

Pip (Level 3 LSA)

Laura, the Level 3 LSA, who had recently become the school’s Habilitation specialist, told me how she was chosen for the Diploma course by the Headteacher and Deputy:

They then put a sign up [in the ‘Comms’ book] saying anyone who was interested to let them know and they had an informal chat with those who had put their names forward … they were getting reports that I was doing a good job and when they saw me around school - I was working with a student who’s very visually impaired - and they were very happy with what I was doing with him and I think it came out of that … I’m glad I did it and I really enjoyed doing it

Laura (Level 3 LSA)

There were also a number of LSAs who were funding themselves to study for degrees and diplomas, whilst also working at Willowbank. For example, the senior LSA Jackie, who was working towards a degree in Childhood Studies. She told me:
I asked to go on it, so it’s not something they are paying for, I’m doing it myself, but they’re giving me the time to do it. So that’s something I actively sought out. I get a day release to go to uni, so that’s the time they give me. I don’t get paid for the day release, I get it docked, but they allowed me the time out

Jackie (senior LSA)

What was fascinating was that very few LSAs mentioned that their class teachers had been instrumental in suggesting ways they might want to build on their learning and development. It was Penny, the Headteacher, and Sandy, the Deputy Head, who were credited with identifying the interests and strengths of the paraeducators and who suggested possible opportunities for additional training. As Jackie went on to say:

*I feel very supported in my development from Penny; but here they look for do-ers and the more work you put in, the more you get out of it for yourself*

Jackie (senior LSA)

Returning to the role of class teachers in the development of their staff, only senior teacher Louise’s name was mentioned in this regard. One LSA suggested that the reason teachers were not as proactive as Penny and Sandy was because they believed the LSAs received adequate support and guidance from the Autism and Intervenor groups. It was noteworthy that teachers’ awareness of the need to be more involved in developing the skills of their LSAs increased during the latter half of my fieldwork, with the advent of the new organisation-wide performance management process and the addition of line management responsibilities to the teachers’ role. I discuss the consequences of this in chapter seven.

It was clear that many of the LSAs welcomed the formal learning opportunities provided by Willowbank, prompting one LSA to tell me:

*I think this school has the best trained staff to any I’ve worked at ... LSAs are very highly trained and that’s thanks to Cedars Trust*

Carolyn (LSA)
As I noted previously, the focus on formal learning opportunities was highly evident at Willowbank, with the Headteacher and Deputy Head encouraging LSAs to attend courses relevant to their area of work. This reliance on the provision of formal learning opportunities outside the workplace produced a culture in which this type of learning was highly valued and overshadowed the importance placed on, and the time made for, non-formal learning and on-the-job support. The lack of on-the-job supervision had been articulated to me at length by LSAs when they talked about the difficulties experienced by the new members of their class teams. But it was not only novice LSAs who needed opportunities for work based learning, as the views of longer serving LSAs in the following section clearly illustrate.

6.6 Lack of support for non-formal learning

The majority of the work for LSAs related to their pupil’s educational targets, which were derived from the Individual Education Plan (IEP). At the start of the academic year teachers wrote an IEP for each of their pupils and short, medium and long term targets were constructed based on the IEP. The IEP was reviewed twice a year, once in February and again at the end of the school year. The activities in each of the pupil’s lessons were designed to help them advance towards the goals in their targets. The varied nature of the students’ intellectual disabilities meant that signs of progress could be very subtle, and the achievement of targets could take a considerable amount of time. Given the importance of the sessions, which had been carefully tailored to each pupil’s educational needs, I asked interviewees how LSAs understood what the teacher would like the pupil to achieve in each session and how the session should be managed. It emerged that LSAs did not usually go through the IEP with their teachers and many did not look at it on the school’s ‘Exchange’ computerised recording system. As a result, many paraeducators did not have a complete understanding of the overall educational goals for their student for the coming months. The lesson plans and the associated targets were recorded on
‘Exchange’ and this information was what the LSAs based their sessions on. When considering the focus of my research question, the following quotes from two LSAs are highly significant in the way they articulate that they rarely received hands on instruction from their teachers and yet these paraeducators were expected to deliver the one-to-one pupil sessions:

It is difficult because at the minute [teacher] is never here and then she comes in and changes stuff and it’s like ‘actually I’ve been working really hard to get him to that point so please don’t come in and change everything now, when you’re not here. I struggle with that … as an LSA you are a support assistant, that’s what your job says, but we’re not a support assistant we’re teaching so it’ll be nice to see how teachers do it, so that we can take that on board and do it ourselves. But we’re not trained to the standard they are, we haven’t been to uni for however many years, I think it will be nice to take on board what they do

Carolyn (LSA)

When one reflects on what Carolyn said, it contradicts her earlier comment that the school had the “best trained staff” (meaning LSAs) and illustrates the perception at Willowbank that formal qualifications equated to a high level of training. Yet it was clear that these key members of the workforce wanted and needed on-the-job support from their teachers:

I find it difficult because I’m not a teacher, so I never know whether I’m doing right or wrong. I do find that difficult. Lots of time the teacher’s not there delivering the session … I’d like to see them model sessions because at the end of the day they are teachers, they are paid teachers and trained teachers and we’re not. I haven’t got the first clue about teaching, I can support them [pupil], if the teacher shows me what to do - and that’s very lax

Helen (Level 3 LSA)

The comments from Carolyn and Helen were clear in their emphasis that they were not trained to undertake the work of teachers and yet this was the situation they were placed in on a daily basis. This was an ongoing problem for the LSAs at Willowbank
because they were offered a substantial amount of formal training with the aim of informing their work as support assistants, but in their delivery of the one-to-one sessions they were expected to use a level of discretion usually associated with the role of a teacher.

There was an awareness amongst LSAs that a number of their peers did not find their teachers supportive of their learning needs. The long serving and very experienced senior LSA, Caroline (who was aware of all that went on around the school) told me, “teachers put demands on LSAs without showing them what they should be doing”. This was noticeable in one class in particular, when I had noted that the teacher was not there on the occasions I walked around the school observing the day-to-day activities. When an LSA brought this up in her interview I asked why this might be the case, and was given the following reply:

*She does [pauses] other things; I’m sure it’s all very important [laughs]. A different class might be completely different, but from my experience in here, it’s the LSAs [who advise each other] and then the teacher, she’s not really here very often, if I’m honest*”

Carolyn (LSA)

However, some LSAs did tell me about the on-the-job supervision they had had from their teacher, albeit not on a regular basis. It is also noteworthy that in the quote below an LSA mentions that often queries about pupil support were not clarified face-to-face, but via the school’s intranet system:
Teachers are there to guide you if you’ve not worked with someone [pupil] before, but they will inform you and where possible I’ve been able to work alongside a teacher for maybe one of the sessions, maybe I will have been working with a student all day, but for the first session I’ve worked alongside a teacher and they’ve shown me how best to work with that student, it’s been really helpful. It doesn’t happen on a regular basis admittedly ... There is an ‘alert me’ button on Exchange so you can write and say ‘not sure about this target, please can you specify, please can you give me more understanding what you want from this student, or what you want me to help the student to do’, because I think sometimes you’re not always 100% certain

Karen (LSA)

Whilst Karen had no hesitation in alerting their teacher, via Exchange or face-to-face, if she was unsure about sessions or felt some changes were needed, there were LSAs who were not so proactive. Some LSAs did not alert their class teachers because they did not recognise what they did not know and so it did not occur to them to alert their teacher when their pupils failed to make progress, when more experienced LSAs would have identified that revisions needed to be made to the sessions. Since teachers had numerous demands on their time this meant that any checks on the way LSAs delivered sessions could take some time to be addressed. A comment from Cerys, a senior teacher, brought this point home to me:

If I see loads of ‘not achieved’ that would flag up to me to go and speak to the LSA about it [my emphasis]

Cerys (senior teacher)

6.7 Class teams and support for learning

In the vignette at the beginning of this chapter, Hattie, the LSA, mentioned Class C’s supportive environment and how each member contributed to improving the practice of their peers. The atmosphere of support was apparent whenever I visited the main Class C classroom, where three of the students had a number of their sessions. Despite each of the students working in a separate area of the classroom with their LSA, I observed the ease with which the staff stepped in to help each other, or
noticed when a pupil achieved something new and praised them. Similarly, when team members observed a colleague experiencing difficulties with a pupil’s session. Hattie commented on this when I spoke to her a number of weeks after my most recent visit to the class:

_Everybody’s really good at being focused on their students, but also aware of other students. So if you’re in a two to one situation and you see another LSA is struggling with their pupil - [for example] Aahil - as he’s not that motivated, you may go in and try a change of face_

Hattie (LSA)

This way of working meant that LSAs in Class C were aware of the practice of their colleagues and also the reasons behind what they do, as illustrated in the quote from Hattie above. The teacher, Louise, was keen to promote an environment amongst staff where they recognised that their own learning and development was important for the pupils and for the individual LSAs themselves. The following quote by their teacher, Louise, during a Thursday after school class meeting was typical of her approach:

_I wondered whether on a certain day, if after school we have fifteen minutes or even half an hour where no-one speaks and everyone just talks [using sign language] about what they’ve done during the week, to have a little bit of practice because it will help Lucy and Kathryn [LSAs] because they need to up their signing ... they’re going to be with Russell who’s a signing student and they need lots of practice_

Louise (senior teacher)
Pip, the Level 3 LSA, talked about the benefits of the Thursday afternoon meetings her class had:

*On a Thursday, you can discuss anything - if you’re working on something particularly with your student you can then express that in a team meeting and everybody knows instantly, it’s not like I’ve got to tell you and then I’ve got to go and tell someone else. Any problems somebody else might go ‘oh I wonder if that will work’ it’s sort of like an ideas sharing thing, physios can come in, OTs can come in and say ‘we’re going to have it based on this, this week’ and you can share your ideas*

Pip (Level 3 LSA)

An LSA, Fleur, who had been at the school for eleven years described how her teacher, Stephanie, used their class meetings to share her ideas from the MSI postgraduate course she was taking:

*The particular teacher I’m working with now, she’s very on the ball, she’s very good at getting all the information, she’s very knowledgeable and she likes to explain, she takes her time to explain*

Fleur (LSA)

**6.8 The impact of artefacts**

The high volume of paperwork that needed to be completed on ‘Exchange’ by the LSAs at the end of the day limited the amount of time class teams could actually sit down with each other, even on the day designated for class meetings:

*We’re meant to meet every Thursday, doesn’t always happen, if we have a lot of incidents we have a backlog of behaviour incident forms to do ... They take forever, I’ve known to start one at twenty past three and still be here at five o’clock*

Helen (Level 3 LSA)

The electronic behaviour incident forms that Helen referred to had recently been introduced and were completed using the school’s ‘Exchange’ intranet system. The
behaviour management recording software had been bought as an off-the-shelf package by the Trust’s IT department and LSAs routinely complained that the system was poorly designed and not fit for purpose. For example, data could be deleted by mistake if the enter key was used instead of the mouse, and the entire form had to be completed in one go as it was impossible to save incomplete information. Staff also criticised the structure and wording on the form because it did not allow them to record incidents in a way that properly reflected the nature of the events, which arose because of the complex learning difficulties experienced by the pupils at Willowbank and were not the result of ‘misbehaviour’. This routinely used artefact also hampered discussions between class members at the end of the day since staff were occupied on computers completing behaviour forms rather than sharing ideas with colleagues and reflecting as a group how best to support their students. Time for talking was limited even further because everyone was also required to complete their student progress recording on the system. This situation was exacerbated by the lack of computers in certain classrooms, which meant staff had to take it in turns to complete their day’s recording, with the result that there was a constant flow of people moving around classrooms, or leaving the room to access a computer elsewhere as soon as one became available. Figure H overleaf, is the floorplan of ‘Malvern corridor’ and illustrates this point. For example, Class D had three computers in the same room and so staff in that class could all sit together at the end of the day, with more opportunities for informal and non-formal learning. This was not the case for staff in either Class C and Class E, whose LSAs were divided among several rooms in order to complete their daily recording, and had to move between rooms as and when a computer became available.
Figure H: Floorplan of Malvern corridor

Malvern Corridor

6.9 The geography of the school

The floorplan in Figure H above does not only illustrate the problems for staff because of the various locations of computers. A not insignificant predicament at Willowbank was how staff could disseminate information to all of their colleagues when they were dispersed around the school building in classes that were, in effect, discrete entities. In her interview, Eleanor talked about how isolated class teams can feel depending on where they were physically located in the building. Eleanor’s class is on Woburn corridor on the first floor of the school:

*You do feel isolated when you’re upstairs ... I can go a week and not see somebody that I used to work with every day, side by side for 12 months*

Eleanor (LSA)

Because of the geography of the school, staff communication and the promotion of school-wide learning of a more informal and incidental nature was problematic and from my observations this was not an easy dilemma to solve. Many of the LSAs who
worked further away from the central area of the school did not go to the two staff social spaces during breaks, which were ten minutes in the morning and thirty minutes at lunchtime. Some months previously Penny and Sandy had tried to instil in staff the need to leave their classrooms for breaks, but whilst staff no longer sat in their classrooms at these times, a number of them found other places nearby to sit and eat. When staff did go to communal spaces they did not vary which room they went to as Helen, a Level 3 LSA (whose classroom was near the main corridor), said to me:

_We all sit in the same place, we all sit in the same room; I’ll never sit in the room with the [dining] table, I’ll sit in the one with the [comfortable] chairs and I’ll sit in the same chair! Everybody has their own chairs and won’t sit in anybody else’s chair_ [laughing]

Helen (Level 3 LSA)

The lack of association with the wider workforce was further compounded because of the nature of the students’ disabilities, which required every pupil to be closely supervised at meal times. This meant that LSAs and teachers took their lunch breaks on a rota system, with the result that there was only half of the staff at lunch at any one time.

As noted earlier, although LSAs strongly resisted looking at work-related information during their breaks, this did not mean that staff did not participate in informal learning. I witnessed discussions in the staff rooms where LSAs chatted about how they had managed to overcome problems when pupils were struggling with their sessions, or how students had managed to achieve something for the first time. The camaraderie was clear to witness, but it was routinely the same LSAs involved in these discussions, not those who worked at the furthest corners of the school and who chose to keep themselves separate. A point made by Cerys reinforced the value of LSAs coming together at break times, even if they do not intentionally use that time as a vehicle for learning:

_I don’t think breaks are information sharing times anyway, but it does help if you know someone socially through breaks – it’s easier then to go and talk to them_
Another constraint on opportunities for informal learning was illustrated by Eleanor whose classroom was on the upstairs corridor:

*There would be people walking around school [downstairs] who I wouldn’t know - and they’d been working here for 2 or 3 weeks - because you don’t see them. So it can be isolating working upstairs, but for the students that’s a really good thing because they can’t pick up on the vibes of the rest of the school [i.e. incidents] and everybody feels the anxiety, whereas it’s a lot calmer, quieter [upstairs]*

Eleanor (LSA)

Whilst the benefits for the pupils are clear, Eleanor’s words echoed what Hattie had felt when she was in a classroom with Mary on their own with little opportunity to talk to colleagues during the day and she was grateful for the chance to speak to her peers at the Autism café and gain their perspectives and feedback. Other LSAs also talked about how difficult it was to be on their own supporting a student for long periods at a time:

*It’s just you and that student all day except for your dinner, that can be difficult, you can’t share any information, you don’t know any information*

Pip (Level 3 LSA)

Those LSAs who supported pupils in isolated spaces for the entire time also lacked the chance for informal learning from working in proximity to their teachers and other LSAs, unlike the LSAs who worked in Class C’s three student classrooms, or the LSAs in Michelle’s class who had whole class sessions timetabled several times a week.

During my fieldwork I sat in Willowbank’s main reception area and observed the comings and goings of staff and pupils. Most of the time staff would exchange brief greetings with their colleagues and students, as they did not have time for lengthier discussions because they were concentrating on helping pupils walk with frames or canes, or were keen to move more anxious students through the noisy thoroughfare
as quickly as they safely could. The only notable exception was when staff were waiting to sign themselves and their pupils in the “In/Out” book, which was mandatory so that the Caroline, the LSA responsible for Health and Safety, would know who was in the school building at any given time. Usually a few LSAs were waiting to sign the book and this offered brief opportunities for a conversation while colleagues waited their turn. On more than one occasion I noted that Laura, the Habilitation LSA, was asked for advice and there was a genuine interest from her colleagues in the information she could share. Chance meetings in reception also provided opportunities for LSAs to ask the therapists, who were often walking through the area on their way out to the hydro pool and therapy rooms in other parts of the site, if they could spare some time during the day to help them resolve a problem they were having with a piece of equipment, or when they were unsure of a new exercise their pupil had been given. Although these ad hoc informal learning exchanges undoubtedly proved useful, they were by their very nature limited by the time staff had for discussion, and the number of people the information reached. Given the challenges of the geography of the school and the very real problems staff had to speak to each other during the day, the importance of facilitating learning across the school needed to be more explicitly acknowledged. The lack of attention given to resolving this problem displayed the learning culture at Willowbank in a less expansive light.

6.10 Conclusion

The amount of formal training offered to LSAs at Willowbank was remarkable, as readily noted by the paraeducators in their interviews. Staff had to pass the BSL Level 1 qualification by the end of their first year at the school, register to do an NVQ in Teaching and Learning and attend either Autism or Intervenor training. Moreover, the Headteacher and Deputy Head were highly supportive of more experienced LSAs undertaking additional studies, if they had a strength or a particular interest in an area. This strong culture of formal learning at Willowbank gave LSAs the confidence to apply for further courses, such as degrees and diplomas (including self-funding in several instances), and going on to develop skills and knowledge and gaining qualifications they had not thought possible when they had left school. There was an emerging Intervenor community of practice, encouraged by
Headteacher Penny, which provided LSAs with opportunities to discuss and define how they approached their practice. Penny also supported Debbie, the Autism champion, in her initiation of the Autism cafes and Debbie continued to make strenuous efforts to build a learning group for the LSAs who worked with pupils with ASD. From this perspective, the school could be viewed as highly expansive in terms of Fuller and Unwin’s ‘Approaches to Workforce Development’ (2004a).

However, the lack of non-formal learning opportunities caused LSAs significant problems in their delivery of their pupils’ educational sessions, with very few chances for the paraeducators to work with their class teachers or other LSAs. The difficulties were amplified because the LSAs were working with pupils one-to-one and often in isolation. This resulted in a significantly grey area between the role of the teacher and that of an LSA, because it was the LSAs who were acting as the main educator for the majority of the time, despite not having an appropriate teaching qualification. Furthermore, there was little acknowledgement of the learner status of new LSAs, who assumed the role of a full LSA from the moment they joined the school. The novice LSAs were particularly concerned about the responsibility they were expected to take from such an early stage in their employment, but more experienced LSAs were also unhappy about the level of discretion they were afforded in their work. Furthermore, it became clear that the layout of the school had a detrimental effect on the amount of opportunities staff had for informal learning. This was a problem that staff seemed unwilling, or unable, to overcome. These aspects shed a more restrictive light on the learning environment at Willowbank.

However, before turning to the next chapter, it is important to note that when the necessary factors aligned for effective workplace learning it resulted in high quality educational support. This was there to see from the vignette at the beginning of this chapter and in Hattie’s support of Mary and the progress these two exceptional individuals made over the course of a school year.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Roles and responsibilities

Managing the team

At the start of my fieldwork a significant change is announced at Willowbank. The following September the Deputy Head, Sandy, will become Headteacher of the school when Penny, who is nearing retirement, will reduce her hours and move to a different position at the Trust. Penny is well regarded by Willowbank staff and her longstanding contribution is recognised by everyone at Cedars Trust, particularly as during her time as Headteacher the school has grown in number and broadened its intake of pupils to individuals with very complex learning difficulties. It is also under her stewardship that Willowbank has received two ‘Outstanding’ judgements from Ofsted. Notwithstanding the respect with which Penny is held, Willowbank staff are enthusiastic about the appointment of Sandy as Headteacher, but this impending change means that management at the school is rather preoccupied with this transition for much of the school year.

As the summer term progresses Sandy’s philosophy regarding the running of the school begins to emerge more strongly, in particular the priority - and urgency - she
places on ensuring the roles and responsibilities of teachers and LSAs are clearly defined. Indeed, it is at Sandy’s request - whilst still Deputy Head - that I have become involved in helping teachers to develop their understanding of how to manage their LSAs, including reflecting on the expectations they have of their class teams. In particular, I have been asked to do a short training session with teachers after school in April. My involvement is intended to provide additional support for Willowbank’s teachers because during the next few months the teachers should all attend the Trust-wide managerial training, known as ‘Boost’, which was introduced by the Human Resources department the previous summer. I spoke to Sandy and Penny about the managerial skills they feel the teachers need to develop, so I can be mindful of this during my training session (that neither Penny nor Sandy attend). Shortly before my session with the teachers I also meet the member of the Human Resources team, Angela, who is responsible for the delivery of the Boost course across the Trust. In addition, I have talked to the teachers, over the course of several weeks, about what they wanted to cover, and just prior to the training I had a further meeting with Sandy to go through my plans. At this meeting, Sandy reiterates that one of the key problems is “how LSAs perceive the teachers’ role” and that she believes they see their teacher as “a manager who will solve all their problems”. Whilst we are talking about the teachers’ training, Sandy also asks me if I would facilitate a full-day meeting she is having in May, with the three senior teachers, to review and revise the School Development Plan ahead of the new academic year, when Sandy will return as Headteacher. Penny will be joining that meeting at the beginning and end of the day to provide guidance and to answer any queries the group have. Sandy is keen to ensure roles and responsibilities of all of the staff at the school are clear in the Development Plan and hopes that the revisions to the document will dovetail with all the other managerial and performance management training underway at the Trust.

And so, at half past three on a Tuesday in April, I am about to begin my ninety-minute training session with eleven teachers, four of whom attended the first ‘Boost’ course last summer. Inwardly I reflect that, despite the Trust emphasising the pivotal role managers have to play in the success of the organisation’s five-year strategy, nearly a year later the majority of teachers are still waiting to attend this corporate training. I hope to encourage those who have attended to share what they learnt. I
am also keen to make my session relevant to the working environment of the participants, in the hope that such contextualisation will help the teachers put what they learn into practice.

Everyone settles down with tea and biscuits and the general end of day chatter subsides. I give a brief introduction and the session gets underway. I ask the group what they think their role entails and what they believe Penny and Sandy expect from them as teachers. There is silence while they consider what I have said, and it seems as if they have never been asked these questions explicitly before. Louise says she sees her job as supporting her pupils to learn, which includes managing a team of people and giving them the training and skills they need to promote the children’s learning. Louise’s words start an animated conversation, which inevitably triggers a discussion about staff shortages and how the teachers end up spending their time. There are several voices speaking at once, but gradually the group quietens and Rosie says, “your role becomes an LSA realistically, rather than that of a teacher”. Evelyn comments, “sometimes we’re just not supernumerate, therefore it’s more difficult to model what you want the child to learn - it’s also difficult to oversee how your team are” to which Stephanie responds, “you’re always thinking ‘oh, what’s going on over there?’”

Ruth makes the point, which clearly resonates with the entire group because they all nod or speak their agreement, “it’s not the teaching I find hard, it’s the managing of the team that I find hard. When I’m with a student I can teach, it’s all the things going on with the other students...” Rosie interrupts animatedly, “because you’re only teaching that student, but the problem is you’ve got to be teaching the others” and Ruth continues, “so I move round the next day - that’s the management side of it”.

These remarks prompt the group to share their concerns about how certain they can be that their LSAs are doing what is expected of them given that the teachers - even when they are working in their supernumerary capacity - cannot be in six places at once. Ruth joins in quite forcibly:

You have to be able to have trust in your team and know that your team understand what it is they’re supposed to be doing and know that they’re going to actually
feedback what happens, so you can try and monitor and improve things even if you’re not there. Your team plays a massive part in how well you are able to do your job.

At this point I ask the teachers how they make their expectations clear to their LSAs and the responses that come back illustrate the lack of consistency shown by these line managers. Michelle and Ruth routinely speak to their LSAs individually so that the LSAs know their teacher’s expectations. Others say they have informal chats at the beginning or end of the day, although in a few classes I did not observe this happening as regularly as some of the teachers clearly believe it does. Many express the view, captured by Rosie, that “it’s impossible to get that quality time as a team”. It is apparent that the problem of split classroom space is a source of irritation for those trying to manage LSAs, who are dispersed around the school building. Ruth shares her tactic for bringing all of her team together into one of her three classrooms at the end of the day, prompting laughter from us all. “I’ll get Stan [an LSA] to make a brew and they all have to come and get it! ‘The brew’s here, but it’s here!’ That works!” Stephanie follows this with the comment “once I went to find my team [after all the pupils had left for the day] and they were all in Alan’s [a student’s] room and I had to fish them out to come to our class meeting”. When I ask why Stephanie thought all her staff were in a pupil’s room, she replied “I think they were skiving, actually that is what they were doing – and they didn’t do it again after I caught them”. I was (privately) surprised by what Stephanie said as I know most of the LSAs in her class as several of them had participated in my research and I had worked with most of them during my time as a volunteer, and I had never observed them “skiving”. It was interesting, therefore, when later in the session after Michelle, Ruth and Louise have shared how they are very specific with what they ask their LSAs to do, Stephanie says “I was thinking about having a class meeting, where everybody could get things off their chest”.

I ask the group what their LSAs expect from them as the class teacher and without missing a beat Evelyn replies “they expect us to have all the answers”. I ask why this is the case, but no one comes up with any ideas. Stephanie comments that the LSAs “want resources made and ready – these are not things that I think I should be doing and the Boost programme did teach us some skills in avoiding that”. Liz says:
They expect us to listen to them - listening to their suggestions - they want us to know where they are going to be. They want you to have ideas, lessons that are prepared, two-way communication, student targets that are current that they could input into

Liz was right in her summation of what the school’s paraeducators want from their class teachers, but from what I had been told by the LSAs, this rhetoric did not match the reality of their day-to-day work.

The group begin to talk about some of their LSAs who are resourceful, but there are many examples of class members who, as Louise puts it, “struggle with their initiative”. As the discussion progresses the teachers explore reasons why LSAs may feel reluctant to take the initiative. Michelle observes:

I think it’s also about how long people have been here, so a lot of my staff - apart from one person - everybody’s new, they quite often know the answer, but I wouldn’t necessarily expect them to have the confidence just to go off and do it because they do want to check

Ruth agrees, adding “you have to differentiate with your staff as you do with your students, don’t you?” Stephanie brings up some of the learning from the Boost training she had attended the previous year:

On the Boost programme this is where they taught us to say ‘what are the options? I know you don’t know the answer, but if you did what might the answer be?’ There’s a series of questions where you basically don’t give the answer, you make them think about the answer

Her words begin a discussion and we talk about examples the participants raise and how they could put this suggestion into practice. But as the group chats, what is emerging is a picture of teachers who are reluctant to delegate tasks, even those that are universally recognised as the responsibility of LSAs, such as making resources for their students. I query why this is the case. Rosie sighs “but I know how I like things done and sometimes it’s just easier to do it yourself” and Ruth laughs “I’ve had to let go and accept that not everybody likes an equal border around symbols!” Liz asks the group:
But at what point do you actually say, ‘but that’s not good enough it’s got to be done again’? Because quite often I find myself putting stuff up [that her LSAs have produced] with my toes curling [but still saying] ‘yeah that’s great, well done’

I ask what the mechanism is for agreeing with LSAs what activities they are responsible for and how LSAs and teachers clarify role expectations on both sides. Liz mentions the emergent performance management system “we’re just rolling out a new programme, so it’s quite early days for us, but hopefully that will help us”. I comment that this is also the way to help line reports to understand what is an acceptable level of performance. The discussion turns to the new performance management system and how the teachers are struggling to write appropriate targets for their line reports. We spend time going through the principles of setting meaningful targets and share ideas about the wording of targets for the specific examples the teachers raise. When I ask how the information is captured and how often line managers sit down with their LSAs to discuss their performance and development, I am surprised by what I am told. It transpires that although the performance management system was introduced the previous Autumn, there is confusion amongst the teachers about what the process actually involves and what the new target setting and appraisal documentation looks like. It appears communication around this pivotal initiative has been erratic and there is agreement that clarification is needed from the Human Resource department as a matter of urgency.
7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss my findings that relate to the demands of being a teacher and line manager at Willowbank and how these demands affect the teachers’ ability to support the learning and development of their LSAs. In addition, I reflect as to how well Willowbank’s teachers had been equipped to undertake the role of line manager, including the effectiveness of the training and support provided by Cedars Trust’s Human Resources department. This department was responsible for delivering the Boost training for line managers and for introducing the new Trust-wide performance management process. Since Human Resources had a key role in facilitating the development of the teachers’ line management skills, this meant that this department also had a considerable influence as to how well the school’s LSAs were equipped to perform their work.

As my fieldwork progressed, the data revealed that there was a noticeable shift in the balance of authority at Willowbank as Headteacher Penny began to stand back from the day to day management of the school and Sandy, the Deputy Head, became increasingly instrumental in leading the school in preparation of becoming Headteacher at the start of the new school year.

Being a line manager at Willowbank brought with it duties that are echoed in organisations far and wide, but which are not ordinarily expected of classroom teachers. It is unusual for a class teacher to be responsible for the line management of up to ten staff, bringing with it the associated discussions and paperwork. As Penny said:

*Even experienced teachers don’t ever in most organisations run a team of six or seven - maybe more - LSAs, they might have one teaching assistant in a class of thirty. So that’s not exactly in the same league as having five or six*

Penny (Headteacher)

In fact, some of the teachers at Willowbank were coordinating and supervising the individual workload of up to eight LSAs every day. In addition, there was the added complication that because their LSAs spent much of the time with students dispersed
around the school, they only had limited oversight of how the one-to-one sessions were being handled by their class team members. And so, in this chapter I explore how this array of factors affected the workplace learning environment for the LSAs at the school.

7.2 The teachers’ attitude to managing LSAs

From the discussions at the training session I delivered to the teachers, my interviews with staff and my observations around school, it was apparent that for much of the school day the teachers’ priorities centred on organising the daily schedules of their LSAs (that is, who would be supporting which student, where and when). This brought to mind something Sandy, the Deputy Head, had said to me during one of our conversations about teachers not timetabling their time effectively, but reacting to situations and requests. For example, a member of the class team asking if the teacher could find a resource that was missing, rushing to help with a behavioural incident, or working for an extended period of time with one student because there was a shortage of LSAs. Given the reactive, rather than proactive, culture around the school it became evident that teachers had little time to think about the learning and development of their LSAs.

Furthermore, it was unclear how often the quality of the support LSAs provided to pupils was monitored by these line managers. When I asked about this some staff pointed out that lesson observations took place several times during the year, but when one considers that there were sixty LSAs at Willowbank it could only be a minority who would be observed since pupils’ sessions took place in numerous spaces around the school (and not in one classroom as in mainstream environments). Others told me that teachers would distinguish the standard of support by the way in which the pupil’s learning was progressing, but it could be argued that this approach lacked objectivity. An experienced LSA, Helen, noted in her interview:
**For a lot of the sessions** [the teacher says] ‘right you’ve got this target to follow’, so I need to do a worklist [for her pupil], but what do I need to put in that worklist? She’s meeting her targets ‘cos I’m making up the worklist, but it might not be an appropriate worklist - you can put anything on a worklist for her to follow

Helen (Level 3 LSA)

The lack of discussion between teachers and LSAs is also illustrated in the quote from Ruth, below:

> You have to be able to have trust in your team and know that your team understand what it is they’re supposed to be doing

Ruth (teacher, my emphasis)

What Ruth said illustrates that the teachers needed to rely on their LSAs to provide the educational support that had been set out for the pupils. However, because of the lack of time the teachers spent with their LSAs, there was a thin line between these managers making an informed decision that they could trust that their paraeducators knew what they were expected to do, and hoping they were able to deliver the pupils’ sessions as the teachers had intended when they wrote the plans. And although the absent teachers may well have trusted that their staff were supporting the pupils as they had envisioned, the comment from Helen - who was an experienced LSA - highlights that the discretion afforded the LSAs by their class teachers was not always something they wanted to exercise. This unsatisfactory situation was exacerbated because it was not routine for the LSAs to be involved in the conception (Felstead et al., 2009) of the session plans. Because the plans were written in the LSAs’ absence they were not given the opportunity to talk about what their class teacher intended and to ensure that they understood the reasoning behind the activities. There was another aspect, which further added to this restrictive learning environment, and this was the lack of opportunities the LSAs were given for sharing their ideas when the session plans were being designed.
It was not surprising to me, therefore, that LSAs were unclear about what they needed to do and unsure of the aims of the sessions. When I analysed my data, it occurred to me that the lack of clarity experienced by the paraeducators probably contributed to the problem Ruth articulated:

*I can’t always rely on staff to inform me that targets need changing or need moving on*

Ruth (teacher)

The one-to-one educational model, along with the need for many of the students’ lessons to take place in individual learning spaces, once again emerged as a highly restrictive influence on workplace learning. Stephanie’s comment during her interview with me captured this point:

*Where I’ve worked before we’ve usually all been in the same room, so I’d just go round and say, ‘these are your targets can you work on this’ while we’re doing the session, that’s a more traditional model really and be able to steer the LSAs, but here you literally might be in five or six different rooms*

Stephanie (teacher)

7.3 LSA views on teachers as managers

Of course, when considering the role of teachers as managers there is another fundamental point that needs to be considered and this is the opinions of the LSAs themselves. When analysing my findings, it emerged that the LSAs barely spoke of teachers as line managers and they rarely remarked on the integral part their teacher played in their learning and development. Nor did they mention the extent to which their line managers provided feedback and guidance as to how well they performed as LSAs. As I reflected on this, I realised I should not have been surprised. Until recently LSAs had been supervised by senior LSAs in a process that was really a conversation, which required little preparation and was more akin to a ‘tick box’ exercise. Moreover, from the comments made to me it appeared that there had been little attention expected or given - on either side - to meaningful targets or developmental goals. With the advent of the new performance management system,
and the evident struggle teachers were having with the prospect of supporting and managing performance, it was somewhat inevitable that the LSAs themselves had not made the mental transition from the previous supervisory routine they had been familiar with for many years.

When I tried to identify what the LSAs thought of their class teachers’ management skills from the data I had collected, the comments largely concentrated on the lack of availability of teachers to model sessions, along with the teachers’ supportive - or otherwise - stance towards their paraeducators (and these are aspects I have related in earlier chapters). There were some exceptions such as Caroline, the senior LSA, who had been at Willowbank for many years and who many LSAs sought out when they needed advice or support. When I mentioned that I was doing some training for teachers Caroline told me:

*It’s management skills [they need to spend time on], because they go off to university and they become teachers, but then that’s not teaching them to manage staff and that’s never easy because they’re all different personalities [meaning the LSAs]. So you could have six staff to manage and then you’ve got one that’s always off sick, and you can’t keep a team together and that is the toughest bit about being a teacher, apart from all the paperwork*

Caroline (senior LSA)

Caroline went on to say that teachers also needed to understand that their staff wanted time with them to share their ideas:

*They’re [LSAs] there doing it [working with students] every day so you’d appreciate it if the teachers sat down and went through the IEPs - no teacher does that, nobody sits down with their staff and talks through it and said, ‘for this target what do you think if we did this in this session?’*

There were several implications for workplace learning, which arose as a result of the lack of face-to-face interaction between the teachers and members of their class teams. Firstly, as Matsuo (2012) noted in the study of nurse managers, the ward team were clear on the goals they needed to achieve because their manager actively role
modelled the importance of knowledge sharing between staff. Other authors, such as Hodgkinson (2000), have also emphasised the importance that managers should place on facilitating a learning dialogue, including constructive feedback, between their team members. Yet many of the teachers at Willowbank did not apply this practice themselves and therefore did little to promote a learning culture at the school.

Secondly, because staff used the school’s Exchange computerised system for recording information about pupil sessions each day there seemed to be little incentive for face-to-face discussion between the teacher and their LSAs. Because of the absence of dialogue opportunities for reflection were rare and reflective practice has been shown to be fundamental in the promotion of workplace learning.

### 7.4 The supernumerate role of teachers

It was clear from my findings that LSAs, for the most part, understood the various demands on their teachers’ time that kept them from working with their classes in a supernumerary capacity, which limited the amount of time they spent providing guidance to LSAs in pupil sessions. The situation was also recognised by the teachers themselves, as Louise’s words highlight:

> I struggle to be supernumerate, because of my role as teacher of the deaf, senior teacher and classroom teacher and I’ve got study leave, that’s four afternoons where I’m not in class, sometimes I’ll get cover for the afternoon, but in the morning I tend to end up being with a student. I’ve still got a vacancy in my class, so they haven’t been employed from January, so I tend to plug that gap. I try and make sure I get round everybody, but again we had a terrible few weeks of absences in my class ...

Louise (senior teacher)

However, there was some discontent amongst staff with teachers who used their supernumerary time as non-contact time. Sandy, the Deputy Head, also raised this with me during her interview, in particular in relation to the amount of contact the teachers had with their pupils:
The teacher will be on the computer writing something while the LSA is with the student and I don’t see that being an effective use of the teacher’s time – teaching time. I see recording, writing, sitting on the computer, are non-contact, they shouldn’t be when it’s timetabled as teaching time … They should be engaging students on their timetable, delivering that lesson

Sandy (Deputy Head)

Louise also raised the matter:

Some teachers think that time is maybe useful for checking their emails, doing some paperwork, doing resources, but that’s not how I would like to use it

Louise (senior teacher)

Whilst Sandy and Louise were highlighting how the inappropriate use of supernumerate time kept teachers away from their pedagogical role with pupils, the lack of availability of these line managers had detrimental outcomes for the on-the-job learning of the LSAs.

How all of the educators were using their time - and the reasoning behind it - was something Sandy intended to address by making the responsibilities of teachers and LSAs more explicit in the School Development Plan, and by applying the new performance management process effectively:

One of the things that worries me is the lack of clarity in our roles and that people would be able to manage their time better if they knew exactly what they were working towards and when they needed to do it by - so we all know what’s expected of us and that would then come out of your performance appraisal and your targets

Sandy (Deputy Head)

I return to consider the performance management system and its consequences for employee learning and development in section 7.6.
7.5 Moving forward with a new Headteacher

In May, a month after the training session with teachers, I facilitated the one-day meeting at which Sandy and the three senior teachers (Liz, Cerys and Louise) reviewed the school objectives as detailed in the School Development Plan (SDP). This extensive document had been drafted by Penny, the current Headteacher, at the start of the year. Penny attended the meeting for an hour at the beginning of the day and an hour at the end to provide background information and answer questions on any aspects that were unclear. Sandy wanted to use the meeting to highlight areas that required further discussion and clarification and put in place an action plan for herself and the senior teachers, so that an agreed final SDP was ready for the start of the next academic year, when Sandy became Headteacher. Underpinning the discussions was the need to be mindful of the Cedars Trust strategic priorities, and how Willowbank’s development plan would contribute to them. Whilst the scope of the meeting was wide-ranging, I found it highly informative since the ensuing discussion included several areas of particular relevance to my research. For example, the quality of educational provision by LSAs, the ambiguities between teacher and LSA responsibilities, and the implementation of the performance management process.

There were two key aspects that these senior managers had to address when they considered the quality of provision at the school, and how the related actions would be captured in the revised SDP. The first was how to make sure that LSAs and teachers were equipped to fulfil their current responsibilities as educators, and the second was to ensure staff were appropriately trained to deliver the recently communicated objectives that were set out in the Trust’s five-year strategic objectives. Regarding the first consideration, Sandy animatedly said:

*Ensuring the teams are well trained and able to meet the needs of young people, that's the overall aim. My role in this is how much money we've got in the budget for training and identifying staff that need it*

Sandy (Deputy Head)
Being able to demonstrate the quality of the educational provision would also contribute to the Trust’s aim of becoming a Centre of Excellence, and in the minds of external organisations (such as local authorities) the quality of provision was measured by the formal qualifications attained by school staff (for example, the Intervenor qualification). Having well qualified staff would also increase Willowbank’s chances of maintaining - and potentially increasing - pupil numbers at a time of public sector budget cuts, when local authorities were scrutinising the breadth of the provision they funded. Moreover, parents were accessing their authority’s Local Offer and judging for themselves which school they considered to be the best for their child. Willowbank was already ahead of the game in its ability to cite the qualifications undertaken, or being undertaken, by its LSAs, which included British Sign Language, Intervenor training, and the in-house Autism course, for which Cedars Trust was to seek external accreditation. These qualifications were in addition to the NVQ in Teaching and Learning that LSAs were also required to complete.

Whilst the school was supporting LSAs to gain numerous formal qualifications, there was concern that the induction training provided to new staff fell short of what was required. The meeting attendees turned their attention to the school specific training given to new starters, which had recently been developed by two of the senior LSAs. Everyone agreed the content was an improvement on what had been done previously, when it had formed part of the generic Trust-wide induction, but Sandy and the teachers felt it still required some work. Sandy was clear that:

* Staff [need to] have appropriate induction training and the right information and tools to equip them to do the job properly, because that’s been sadly lacking. I need to have time to be able to follow these things up and meet with people to make sure the whole system is taking place. At the moment we generate ideas, we say ‘right this is what you do’ [but] there is no effective monitoring of any of these systems at the moment*

Sandy (Deputy Head)

I was interested to hear the comment by the Deputy Head that the induction training needed further refinement, since the provision for non-formal learning was
something that was not given sufficient priority at the school and this was the situation for novice and experienced LSAs. Literature on school leaders emphasises the need for these senior managers to provide continuing professional development that incorporates internal and external opportunities for staff to extend their learning and skills.

Later in the meeting the issue of probationary booklets was discussed. These booklets were produced by the Trust’s Human Resources department and new staff were required to complete them for the first six months of their employment. A couple of LSAs had told me about these booklets, but they certainly did not figure largely in discussions about training. The point the LSAs had made was regarding their uncertainty about who was responsible for checking how they were being completed. Similar concerns were raised by the senior teachers at the meeting with Sandy. Cerys asked:

*Can I just go back to probation reviews [booklets] as I think the Level 3s are signing them off for LSAs? But I think Michelle gave them to Penny to sign off and I know Ruth [who had been a Level 3 and senior LSA] said she was never shown how to actually mark the booklets*

Cerys (senior teacher)

And Liz added:

*One of my LSAs gave them to me and I found out he was meant to give them to his senior LSA and when I told him, he didn’t know who his Senior LSA was*

Liz (senior teacher)

By this time Penny, the Headteacher, had joined the meeting and making reference to the booklets said:
What Human Resources need to get right are the probationary training booklets and the training sessions that are mandatory – they’re all wrong. It’s always been the senior LSAs [who mark the booklets], I mean I do the teachers’ – I’d rather not!

Penny (Headteacher)

The lack of communication between the Headteacher and the rest of the staff as to who should sign off the probationary booklets was symptomatic of the lack of consideration given to the needs of the new starters at the school. This was further highlighted by Penny’s observation that the probationary booklets, and the mandatory training sessions on the induction course, were not fit for purpose. Despite this awareness very little had been done to rectify the situation and this had adversely affected the learning experiences of novice LSAs. Furthermore, clarification about the booklets could have been easily resolved at one of the teachers’ meetings and the information subsequently cascaded to class teams, or noted in the Comms book. I continued to be puzzled as I thought about the words of the numerous LSAs, who were very concerned about new starters being “thrown in at the deep end”, and their views that the initial training these novices received was not fit for purpose. It was all the more mystifying given the problems the school was experiencing in retaining its more junior LSAs.

When I turned my attention to the more established LSAs and explored the data that related to the quality of support provided by these employees, some key features emerged. The first was how an LSA could be effectively assessed in terms of the work they did, when there was a fundamental lack of clarity around the expectations of the role. On this point, Sandy’s words to the senior teachers were striking, not only because they demonstrated her resolve in sorting out the problem, but also because they showed Ofsted judgements are never far from the minds of school leaders:
We are paying you to teach those children and get those outstanding outcomes and get an ‘Excellent’ Ofsted. It’s the teachers’ role to deploy their staff and to timetable everybody to do their job. It’s about team roles. Ask that question: Why do we employ teachers? What is the difference between a teacher and a Learning Support Assistant? Do our Learning Support Assistants understand that? Do they understand that ultimately that is your responsibility?

Sandy (Deputy Head)

The point Sandy made resonated with my observations and interview data, because there were LSAs at Willowbank who did not seem to understand that it was the teachers who were ultimately responsible for the way the pupils’ sessions were managed. From my vantage point that was not surprising since the lack of time teachers spent in individual pupil sessions meant that the LSAs worked with a significant amount of autonomy for most of their working day. Moreover, the attitude that was articulated by the teachers during the training session that “it’s quicker to do it myself” meant that LSAs would observe teachers doing tasks that should have been the responsibility of the paraeducators. It was not surprising, therefore, that LSAs asked teachers to provide them with resources, because it was the LSAs themselves who were in the classrooms teaching the pupils!

What I had not expected was the lack of reference by teachers specifically about the quality of the educational support provided by their LSAs. As I reviewed my data, I noted that the teachers relied on proxy measures for determining quality, such as the timely recording of pupil progress on session plans and whether behavioural incident forms had been correctly completed. Of course, when teachers were unable to witness their staff at work, as routinely happened at Willowbank, it begs the question how could they be in a position to knowledgably assess the quality of the support their LSAs provided? What is more, when one considers the reactive way in which staff were moved around the school, it is perhaps unsurprising that the teachers’ focus was diverted to ensuring all their pupils had support, and the question regarding the quality of that support became somewhat secondary. Although it was clear from the comments of the LSAs that they were highly conscientious in trying to provide the proper support for all pupils, whether or not they usually supported them.
That is not to say that talented LSAs were not noticed, as was the case with LSAs Hattie and Sam, who Caroline (the senior LSA) had called a ‘natural’. In her interview, Sandy had talked about how feedback about LSAs reached her:

> From teachers or observations of staff - so we’ve got a few members of staff at the moment that are particularly good, one in particular is Tracy in Liz’s class who is an excellent practitioner, she’s got something special, and I’ve talked to her about it and said, ‘I’ve observed you and was really impressed with your work with the students, how do you see yourself developing?’

Sandy (Deputy Head)

While it was encouraging to hear how talented LSAs were identified and that their development encouraged, I found it of note that the mechanism for ensuring the quality of the educational support provided by the less conspicuous LSAs was somewhat arbitrary. It was with heightened curiosity, therefore, that I explored the way in which the Human Resources department had introduced the new performance management system during the year I was carrying out my fieldwork. I return to consider this important topic in section 7.6.

The Deputy Head and senior teachers also needed to consider how the School Development Plan captured the prospective training and development of staff to ensure Willowbank would be equipped to deliver its contribution to the Trust’s five-year strategy. Priorities had been identified such as delivering outreach services and ensuring LSAs gained qualifications that were coming to the attention of local authorities (via information provided in schools’ Local Offers and EHCPs). In order to be prepared for the changing - and increasingly competitive - SEND environment, Sandy and her management team needed to identify the type of expertise required, and have a process in place to recognise LSAs who demonstrated the potential to develop in the relevant areas. This had already happened with Laura, the LSA, who had recently completed her Habilitation and Disability diploma. As Sandy noted:
We didn’t have an Habilitation officer, somebody that can help visually impaired people become more independent in their mobility and their access to everything. We had nobody who could support students in terms of their mobility, but some students would come to us with a statement [EHC plan] that would say that they had that need, we didn’t have it, so we would have to buy that resource in, so if we got four students in with that need, it’s worth our while training a member of staff to provide that service

Sandy (Deputy Head)

It was also noticeable that the opportunity to build up external links, with the potential to promote Willowbank’s outreach services, was not far from Sandy’s mind. She expressed this to her senior teachers:

When doing appraisals for our staff that’s one of the areas we should be looking at, we should all be filtering that down saying ‘let’s look at ways we can get people out there, promoting what we do’ … in our targets ‘you have these skills, this interest, so how can we look at getting you out there – what target can we set you linking with local authorities and schools in the area?’ So that comes back to me in making sure we’ve got the capacity for people to go out and do those things

Sandy (Deputy Head)

The reaching out to stakeholders that were located within the school’s productive system, but which were removed from its day-to-day management (such as local authorities), would also provide staff with the opportunity to gain a wider understanding of the SEND landscape.

The plans to expand the services provided by the school were ambitious and would require considerable effort on the part of Sandy and Willowbank staff if they were to be realised. Sandy’s comment that she needed to ensure the school had the capacity to enable staff to be more externally focused was particularly striking, given the significant problems with resourcing at the school throughout my fieldwork.
7.6 The new performance management process

I have noted the importance Cedars Trust placed on the introduction of the new performance management process, which was initiated by the Human Resources department during the time of my fieldwork and I was keen to observe how this initiative played out at Willowbank. The benefit for organisational learning through the adoption of an effective performance management process has been noted in the organisational literature (for example, Arnetz, et al., 2011).

The process had been rolled out across Cedars Trust in the Autumn of 2014, but its introduction at school had been delayed and was still not in place at the end of the following May, despite the organisational requirement that appraisals were to be completed by the end of that month. Although I had attended numerous meetings where the new performance management process was discussed, I was unable to ascertain why the delay had arisen. I was aware that members of the Human Resource department had provided some training in December 2014 and that it had been discussed at the Boost management training courses. I was also aware that the teachers who had gone to the Boost course at the end of the previous academic year had taken away different messages on the topic from those who attended the same course nine months later. Sandy’s frustration with the situation was clear:

_We’re all in the dark and we’re not confident about doing it, also there’s been this Boost going on so we’re going to invite Angela [from HR] in for another session with teachers and then we’ll all be clear about what needs to be done as we’ve all walked away with different ideas. We need to get a view from HR exactly what they are expecting from us_

Sandy (Deputy Head)

The problem of ineffective communication had been raised throughout the time I was at Willowbank and Penny said:

_As an organisation - Cedars Trust - we’re not good at telling everybody everything and it just wastes time!_

Penny (Headteacher)
Sandy continued:

*At the end of the day what you want is for people to be effective in their jobs. You want to know that whatever you’re paying somebody to do, they’re doing it to the best of their ability and that you know what support they need in order to help them do that. What we need to do is make that [new appraisal system] work for us, at the end of the day my job is to make the school effective.*

Sandy (Deputy Head)

Earlier in the meeting Louise had sent an email to Angela, one of the Human Resources team, to ask when she would be able to come to school to talk to the teachers. Later that day Louise told us she had received a reply:

*Just so you know Angela can’t do any training after 3 o’clock, but she is in at half past seven! She said ‘Unfortunately I can’t do after 3, sounds like you might need specific support to model objectives. In which case I would suggest you come armed to the session with a copy of Willowbank’s strategic priorities and your operational KPIs’ - they’re all big words aren’t they!*

Louise (senior teacher)

Penny replied:

*She’s saying you have to come out of class and she’ll teach all the teachers separately; so she’ll have to suggest someone else then, because we can’t take all the teachers out, and if you wait until July it’s too late*

Penny (Headteacher)

The comments by Louise and Penny illustrated the underlying dissonance between the school and the administrative functions at Cedars Trust. Willowbank was not a subdivision of a private sector business, yet the Human Resources department seemed unable to comprehend that the school could not fit into a rigid business model using a language that educators were unable to relate to. This disconnect was humorously demonstrated by Louise when she read the contents of the email from
Angela and her “big words” exclamation, and yet Angela was merely using the language of Cedars Trust that was prevalent in its five-year strategy and the newly implemented performance management process. This lack of understanding of the needs of these educators was further exemplified in Angela’s email when she gives the times she is available to speak to teachers, and Penny’s response to this sums up the frustration that was felt by the educators in the room.

As the teachers realised what was expected of them in the completion of the performance reviews of their staff, they became concerned that there was the expectation by Human Resources that they would complete a year’s worth of appraisals in less than two weeks. Their worries were heightened because performance related pay was being introduced with the new process and they were anxious that if they did not adhere to the timelines laid down by Cedars Trust it would adversely affect staff at Willowbank. In order to allay fears and reassure staff Penny asked Cedars Trust Human Resources Director, Victoria, to come and talk to the teachers at one of their final Wednesday meetings of the school year, only two weeks before the end of the summer term. Penny started the meeting by saying:

_We’ve spoken to Victoria this morning and explained because this year was a trial year and we got off to a slow start, we’ve had various problems, that we haven’t done performance appraisals with the LSAs. But they have had supervisions during the year and they’ve all completed the form that Louise [senior teacher] devised [as a temporary measure], [so] that coupled with things that we know about individuals and what they might have done or not done all pulls together ... so for the LSAs we have got something we can go on_

Penny (Headteacher)
The ensuing conversation was illuminating:

*I'll copy that part of the [new] target form and you can put whether targets have been achieved …* Penny

*But we’ve not set targets …* Rosie (Teacher)

*But you’ve got supervision targets …* Penny

*But we’ve not done those, because we were waiting for the new appraisal system to start* Rosie

*No supervisions at all?* Penny

*Not this school year, no* Rosie

*You need to have conversations because it relates to their pay. I thought you had had some discussions earlier in the year* Penny

As it transpired that a number of teachers had not done supervisions with their LSAs during the year, Victoria suggested ways in which they could collate enough information for the end of the current appraisal cycle. Victoria also confirmed that this final appraisal could be done after the start of the new school year, but by the middle of October at the latest, and that the performance related element of the pay would be backdated to the beginning of September. It was made clear to staff by Penny that when the new academic year dawned everyone at Willowbank would need to follow the new performance management and appraisal process, and that teachers needed to convey this to their LSAs. Victoria went on to say “it’s not a painless process, having a conversation about things they may or may not be doing”, but she also added that part of the reason for introducing the performance related pay element was because employee feedback had said that “it didn’t matter whether staff did a good, bad or indifferent job, everyone was given the same pay rise”.

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Sandy reiterated a point she had repeatedly made as the term went on:

_The key to it is that LSAs know exactly what their job is, so they don’t think they’re exceeding it for doing their job, and to make sure they’re aware of what they are meant to be doing_

Sandy (Deputy Head)

Towards the end of her presentation Victoria said, “there is also a responsibility for the individual if they feel they’ve done well, or exceeded, to bring that evidence with them”; I thought about this point. It would have been surprising if the LSAs, in those classes that had not been briefed about the new performance appraisal process by their class teachers, had collected evidence during the year unlike - for example - those in Ruth’s class who had been encouraged to think in this way. Ruth had benefitted from attending the earlier Boost course and had found it very helpful; she understood what was needed of her as a line manager and had been mindful of this in her dealings with her class team. For example, throughout the year Ruth had emailed her LSAs when they had delivered work beyond their remit, so they had a contemporaneous record for their performance file. She had also introduced her ‘staff member of the week’ certificates to celebrate when an LSA had performed “over and above”. Similarly, Louise - who had also attended the earlier Boost course - understood what was required of her as a line manager and had altered her behaviour in light of this:

_It gave me more confidence to say, ‘oh I think this was done brilliantly, this was done really well, this is maybe something where we could improve, how do you think we could improve it?’ I would feel much more confident now, delivering some feedback than I would before the training, definitely_

Louise (senior Teacher)

The majority of the teachers had spent nine months of the school year without the benefit of the Boost managerial training and had experienced confusion, along with other colleagues at Willowbank, including the Deputy Head, about the new performance management initiative. It should be no surprise, therefore, that these
managers and their direct reports were at a disadvantage and ill-prepared when the time came for appraisals at the end of the academic year. It was also very unclear how these teachers had been involved in promoting the learning and development of their LSAs, if they had not agreed any targets with them.

As I reflected on my findings over the summer following the end of my fieldwork, I was unable to identify why such a piecemeal approach to the Boost course had occurred and, moreover, how so many misunderstandings had arisen at Willowbank over the introduction of the performance management initiative. It was evident that there had been breakdowns in communication at various stages over the year. I also spent time deliberating on the inconsistency of understanding shown by the teachers about the new performance process. What initially mystified me was that the group of eleven teachers, who met every Wednesday after school over the course of the year, had not proactively attempted to harmonise their approach to managing the performance of their LSAs in the face of the ongoing confusion. But as I reviewed all the information I had gathered, it seemed to me that there were so many immediate and pressing demands on the teachers’ time, that dealing with the uncertainty around this new initiative was probably not something they had the capacity, or energy, to tackle.

I had also noted, at the training I did with the teachers in April, that the language of the corporate documents was unfamiliar to them and we spent some time discussing how the terminology might translate into their day to day working lives and those of their LSAs. The language of business strategies was not something that these professionals related to and therefore they struggled to put it into the context of their working lives, and that of their direct reports.

At the end of the meeting with the senior teachers in May, Sandy had summed up the challenges ahead for Willowbank staff:

_We’ve had lots of new people in HR, lots of corporate people coming in, it was a little school for the deaf and communication difficulties and it’s transforming into a big organisation, and you know it’s a steep learning curve for everyone_
From my conversations and observations at school, it did not seem that those ‘corporate people’ at Cedars Trust had fully appreciated the different, and important, perspectives of the educators at Willowbank; perspectives that should have been taken into account as the organisation moved forward with its five-year strategy.

7.7 Reflections on my role as trainer

As my training session involved sharing the knowledge and practices between two different communities, that of a non-educational private sector business and that of a group of teachers, I found myself in the position of a ‘broker’ (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner, E., Fenton-O’Creevy, Hutchinson, et al. 2015) within a larger and more complex ‘learning landscape’ (Wenger-Trayner, E., Fenton-O’Creevy, Hutchinson, et al. 2015). At the outset of my research I had thought that any potential landscapes of learning would connect to communities involved with the education and support of pupils with SEND, and as I looked back on my time at Willowbank it was with some surprise that I noted my own role as a broker who bridged an SEND community with that of the practices of a private sector business.

However, despite my use of the word ‘community’ there were few examples of what Wenger would term a ‘community of practice’ within the school itself, because there was little to identify them as such (Printy, 2008; Wenger, 1998). This was apparent with the group of teachers, since many of their exchanges in the teachers’ meetings, which was the only time they came together regularly as a group, were primarily focused on ‘housekeeping’ information (such as who was organising assemblies and when performance data had to be collated). These professionals had limited time to discuss experiences and ideas in a way that could shape their communal identity and forge ‘shared histories of learning’ (Wenger, 1998, page 86). This was noticeable in the training I did, when it was evident that there had been very little discussion about the Boost managers’ course between those who had attended and their colleagues who had not, despite the ever-present anxieties most of the teachers had about their newly acquired managerial role. At such time the group could have forged ways of working that met their needs as a teaching community who needed to adapt their practices to include managerial responsibilities; but the opportunity to enable “the emergence of a shared sense of purpose, capability or practice, a means for engagement, and a shared set of resources” (Benn, Edwards, Angus-Leppan, 2013,
The breadth of understanding about their role in the performance management of their staff was also puzzling, as there were those who had attempted to implement some form of process - despite the ongoing confusion - and yet others had seemingly given no thought to their responsibilities in this area, even as the end of the academic year moved closer. After my training session I was left wondering why those with more information and skills on which to draw had not shared this with their colleagues proactively at teachers’ meetings. I found it somewhat ironic that a group of professional educators displayed such a restrictive approach to their own learning, which also impacted adversely on that of their LSAs.

7.8 Conclusion

Some aspects remained puzzling as I finished my data collection and began to analyse the substantial amount of information I had gathered. Why was Penny unaware that a number of her teachers were not meeting with their LSAs and setting and reviewing targets? And why was Sandy so unclear of the organisational expectations in this regard? One answer sprang to mind and this was that the transitional activities of Penny leaving her position as Headteacher and Sandy preparing to move into the post the following September, meant that this particular corporate initiative had fallen somewhat by the wayside, as other more pressing priorities were addressed. Indeed, one significant concern during this time was that an Ofsted inspection was just around the corner, although an inspection did not, in fact, materialise. I believe that as Sandy became more confident in the position she would be taking on, she turned her attention to dealing with clarifying the roles and responsibilities of teachers and LSAs, and realised how the new performance management system would help with this. It was Sandy who had asked me to facilitate at the senior managers’ meeting in May, and one of the reasons for this was because I was able to act as a ‘bridge’ between the business vernacular of Human Resources and Cedars Trust management and that of the educational environment of Willowbank.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Discussion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together my research and relevant literature and revisits the question posed at the beginning of this thesis, namely:

What factors influence whether Learning Support Assistants are equipped to provide specialised educational support to pupils with complex learning difficulties?

It is of fundamental importance that special schools employ staff who are properly equipped to support the education of pupils with complex learning disabilities if they are to be able to “help them achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes” as stipulated by the government (DfE, 2015a, page 19). Moreover, the demand for appropriately informed and skilled educators will continue to rise as the number of children who require specialised educational support is increasing, and the learning difficulties they experience are becoming more complex (Emerson and Hatton, 2008; Parrott, et al., 2008). Furthermore, with the advent of the recent SEND legislation (The Stationery Office, 2014) and the requirement that Local Offer information is published on-line (DfE, 2015a), the resultant competitive environment means that special schools must demonstrate the quality and suitability of the educational services they offer. Pertinent to these considerations, and fundamental to this thesis, is the fact that it is LSAs who deliver most of the educational support to pupils with complex learning difficulties (Martin and Alborz, 2014; Stevenson, 2007). It therefore follows that the SEND sector must employ sufficient LSA resource to meet growing pupil numbers, and that these paraeducators have the necessary skills and knowledge to carry out their educational remit. This is a challenging prospect for special schools given that there are no mandatory standards
for classroom support staff, indeed the present Conservative government withdrew their involvement in the collaboration on standards of practice for teaching assistants in 2016 (naht.org.uk, 10th June 2016) and abandoned the National Scholarship Fund for Special Educational Needs and Disability support staff in 2015 (DfE, 2015b).

In this chapter I argue that the provision of workplace learning is a multifaceted endeavour, affected by characteristics such as stakeholder demands, managerial exercise of control over work activities, and the value placed on non-formal learning. However, what I also demonstrate is that even when employers are motivated in their support of employee learning, it is the mode of work organisation that ultimately shapes whether staff can learn and develop the skills they need to accomplish their work.

8.2 The Working as Learning Framework

In this thesis, I employed the Working as Learning Framework developed by Felstead, Fuller, Jewson and Unwin (2009).

The Working as Learning Framework (WALF) is built on three concepts: productive systems; work organisation; and learning environments. Our central argument is that in order to understand the extent to which learning environments are more or less ‘expansive’ or ‘restrictive’ researchers need to examine how work is organised and how its organisation is influenced by wider forces

(Teaching and Learning Research Briefing, October 2008, page 2)

And so, given the multitude of demands on the staff at Willowbank school, I chose to use this framework because of its promotion of comprehensive scrutiny of the issues that affect the provision of learning in organisations.
Another point made by the authors of the WALF also caught my attention:

There is now much awareness of the symbiotic relationship between workplace learning, the organisation of work, level of employee involvement, organisational performance and the broader economic, regulatory, and social context within which organisations have to operate

(Unwin, Felstead, Fuller, Bishop, Lee, Jewson and Butler, 2007, page 333, my emphasis)

Whilst these researchers comment that there is recognition of the way in which these interdependent elements can influence workplace learning, this level of insight has been conspicuously lacking in the literature that relates to the training and development of LSAs and teaching assistants. Indeed, the complexity of such concerns is far from explicit in much that has been written on the training of school staff in general. The context within which Willowbank operated was multifaceted, requiring its senior managers to navigate their way through the consequences of external demands placed on them by government legislation and from the overarching organisation of Cedars Trust, as well as the demands from within the school itself. Such considerations had ramifications for the provision of learning and development opportunities for the LSA workforce at the school.

**8.3 The construction of workplace learning**

Following their extensive research on workplace learning, Fuller and Unwin (2004a) created a framework that identified organisational approaches to workforce development, through their ‘expansive’ and ‘restrictive’ characteristics. Since employers differ in their construction of workplace learning environments the assumption is that organisations that endorse approaches of a more expansive nature, such as managerial participation in employee development, are more likely to have an outlook that promotes workplace learning (Fuller, Unwin, Felstead, Jewson and Kakavelakis, 2007). The literature relating to organisational learning (Felstead and Unwin, 2016; Keep and Mayhew, 2010; Kynadt, et al., 2009) further reminds us that it is important for employees to have access to formal and non-formal learning.
opportunities and that the availability of these approaches shapes the extent to which an organisation’s learning culture could be termed expansive or restrictive.

At Willowbank there was a noticeable ethos of formal learning and this stance on employee development meant that all LSAs had to involve themselves in various formal learning activities, if they wanted to remain employed at the school (i.e. British Sign Language classes, Intervenor training, or the in-house autism course). LSAs also to pass an NVQ in Supporting Teaching and Learning, a training requirement which had been stipulated by the Executive Leadership Team at Cedars Trust many years previously. This proviso illustrates the impact on LSA learning of a demand by stakeholders within Willowbank’s structures of production, even though its benefit for LSA practice was questioned (Martin and Alborz, 2014), including by the Headteacher herself (and echoing criticisms in the literature on NVQs more generally (Cavendish, 2013; Hordern, 2015)). However, there was also evidence of the expansive effect on LSA learning because of pressure from within Willowbank’s productive system (Kakavelakis, 2010), since the hastening of LSA attendance on the Intervenor course was in response to the demands by local authorities on Education, Health and Care plans. Unlike the debateable value of the NVQ, the Intervenor qualification was welcomed by LSAs because it extended their breadth of understanding of multisensory impairments and enhanced their practice.

The school’s robust endorsement and financial backing for paraeducator learning was unusual (Butt and Lowe, 2012; McLachlan and Davis, 2013; MacKenzie, 2011; Salt, 2010) and created a climate where LSAs felt able to request to attend training on topics that would help them to support their pupils more knowledgeably; such requests were often met with a positive response. The learning climate at the school also inspired some LSAs to study for additional SEND qualifications (such as degrees and diplomas), which they funded themselves. The school allowed unpaid leave so that these self-funders could attend lectures, but all other studying was done in the LSAs’ own time. Of course, Willowbank benefitted from the increase in knowledge and skills of those employees who had self-funded their qualifications. Such was the pursuit of formal learning at the school, the initial impression gained was one of an expansive approach to the development of its LSAs (Fuller and
8.4 Barriers to non-formal learning

Notwithstanding the time and effort devoted to courses and qualifications away from the school, a major consequence of Willowbank’s emphasis on formal learning was the lack of recognition that employees must have sustained opportunities for non-formal learning in their place of work (Eraut, 2014; Felstead and Unwin, 2016). It was rare for Willowbank’s senior managers and teachers to acknowledge the benefit of learning as a “relational and dynamic process” (Felstead and Unwin, 2016, page 7), whereby LSAs should work with each other, and their class teachers, to develop their practice in an active and participative manner (Roberts, 2006; Wenger, 1998). A significant outcome of this narrow approach was that LSAs did not feel adequately equipped for the challenging demands of their job. Whilst the attention on formal qualifications was partially driven by demands from within the structural hierarchy, such as those of Cedars Trust and local authorities, the school also faced internal challenges that rendered the provision of non-formal learning activities extremely difficult.

8.4.1 Artefacts and control of work activities

Organisational artefacts have a key part to play in shaping how employees develop their knowledge and skills (Benn, Edwards and Angus-Leppan, 2013; Kakavelakis, 2010; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008) as they can enhance, or hinder, workplace learning and practice. For example, the sparse information needed on the pupil session recording forms did not promote reflection. Artefacts also determine the amount of discretion workers have over their work activities, which can include the manipulation of artefacts by employees to exert control counter to organisational intentions (Felstead, et al., 2009), although subversion in this way was not evident at this school.

At Willowbank, the Comms book was a significant artefact that reified organisational control over the work of LSAs (Wenger, 1998) and which embodied the challenges faced by the workforce. This object was central in setting the tone for
the working day in school, and the on-the-job learning opportunities for LSAs were inextricably shaped by what was communicated in its pages. The ongoing problem with staffing levels at the school, and the relentless need for the reactive reallocation of resources, meant that every day teachers and LSAs were subject to staffing changes that were imposed by the senior teachers and recorded in the Comms book. At such times the staff involved had no control over the disruptions to their workload and the resultant educational support they were required to provide. This lack of engagement with the wider workforce in decision-making and problem solving about resource allocation, whilst understandable from the perspective of speed, meant that staff were not given opportunities to suggest solutions and learn from these problematic situations, or to utilise their existing knowledge of their pupils and class teams to propose alternatives (Billett, 2015). Whilst the involvement of LSAs in resource allocation was not something that had been countenanced at the school, direct participation by employees in “higher level organizational decision making” (Inanc, et al., 2015, page 3) has been noted as being beneficial for workplace learning. This is not only because of the discretion it affords employees over their immediate work tasks, but because they are able to inform organisational decisions more widely; such involvement also reduces work related stress (Perlow and Kelly, 2014). The point about stress is important for the situation LSAs found themselves in at Willowbank, because adding to the strain of their lack of control was the frustration at the frequent interruptions to the support they wanted to provide to their own students. These paraeducators also had concerns for the quality of instruction they felt able to give the unfamiliar students they were moved to assist. This anxiety was vocalised by LSAs in their comments that students were not making the progress they should have been.

The relentless reactive working culture, as epitomised by the Comms book, led to high levels of sickness absence as LSAs buckled under the strain of constant changes to what was expected of them, and the stress of feeling ill-equipped to handle the situations they were placed in. Furthermore, there were numerous resignations by new LSAs who felt unprepared and unsupported in what they were being asked to do, as there was little differentiation by the senior managers and teachers between the identity of novice LSAs as learners (Fuller and Unwin, 2016; Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, Clark, 2006; Wenger, 1998) and their rapidly acquired identity as full
LSAs. The lack of preparedness was not only felt by the newer LSAs, because their more experienced colleagues were also frustrated at the lack of time they had with their class teachers and the paucity of information and supervision they were given.

There was also the issue that LSAs were paid significantly less than their class teachers (Carter and Stevenson, 2012; Hammersley-Fletcher, 2008) and unsurprisingly the low salary led to resignations, since there were other far less stressful jobs to be had locally. For those who stayed at Willowbank, the poor rate of pay added to low morale, particularly when teachers were absent from the classrooms for extended periods of time leaving LSAs to provide pedagogical support, which should have been the responsibility of their better paid and more extensively trained colleagues (Carter and Stevenson, 2012; Hammersley-Fletcher, 2008).

8.4.2 Lack of teacher presence in classrooms

The discussion in the educational literature about the supervision of teaching assistants concludes that teachers have insufficient time to fulfil this aspect of their role (Cockcroft and Atkinson, 2015; Docherty, 2014). However, the way the teachers’ timetables were structured at Willowbank had significant potential for them to provide on-the-job training for their LSAs, because it was designed so that they worked in a “supernumerate” capacity and rotated round their students’ sessions, either working with one student for an entire fifty-minute lesson or moving around more frequently to teach pupils for shorter periods of time. For the LSA this meant that their teacher would be present during several of their sessions every week to model the lesson, provide training and guidance, and observe their practice (Campbell, et al., 2009; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2011). In this way, the teachers’ work was organised so that they were teaching and assessing the pupils, whilst also providing on-the-job training to their paraeducators. However, because of the ongoing shortage of LSA resource, the amount of time the teachers could work in their supernumerate capacity was markedly reduced because they had to stand in for absent LSAs and work with a single pupil for extended periods of time, and at those times there was no LSA present to benefit from any on-the-job training.
Moreover, the opportunities teachers and LSAs had to work together were further diminished because of the amount of time teachers were regularly away from their classrooms. There were several reasons for the absence of teachers during the school day, and it was pressure from stakeholders within Willowbank’s productive system that created this state of affairs. The DfE-mandated SEND postgraduate qualification meant that teachers at Willowbank were permitted one morning or afternoon each week for study leave, as well as time away to attend study schools. The result was that whilst teachers were facilitated in pursuit of their formal learning, the amount of time available for LSAs’ non-formal training with teachers was reduced, and these classroom support staff experienced a restrictive learning environment as a consequence. The limitations on LSAs’ non-formal learning was further intensified by their teachers’ mandatory non-contact time, which kept them out of classrooms for an additional ten per cent of the working week. This was another example of how the DfE, in assisting teachers to fulfil the necessities of their role, adversely affected the workplace learning of LSAs. What is more, the constraints on the development of LSA knowledge had repercussions for pupils, since it was the LSAs who provided most of the pedagogical support in classrooms.

A further difficulty for LSA development was the lack of understanding by teachers of their newly acquired responsibilities as line managers, an extension to their remit which had resulted from the initial phase of Cedars Trust’s five-year strategy. The role of classroom teachers as line managers has received scant attention in the literature, since it is typical for these activities to be carried out by senior managers in schools (Moreland, 2009). The limited literature that is available concludes that teachers express a lack of confidence in their ability to line manage staff (Docherty, 2014; Douglas, Chapin and Nolan, 2016; French, 2000; Wilson and Bedford, 2008). Fuller and Unwin capture the importance of effective managerial support:

*Management is regarded as a pedagogical process – that is, the key role of the manager is to ensure people develop their expertise through working together to solve problems and, crucially, to give constructive feedback on a regular basis*

(Fuller and Unwin, 2016, page 73)
In this respect Willowbank’s teachers had been ill-served by Cedars Trust’s Human Resources (HR) department, as the introduction of the Trust-wide ‘Boost’ training for middle managers and the Trust’s new performance management process had been inconsistent and confusing. What is more, the implementation of the performance management process had not taken into consideration the teachers’ background in education as it had adopted the methods and language of the private sector, without any consideration of the needs of the educational staff to whom such an approach was unfamiliar. The involvement of the teachers in decisions about the introduction of the new performance management process may well have resulted in more positive learning outcomes for these new line managers (Inanc, et al., 2015).

The substantial difficulties and anxieties experienced by the teachers were heightened by the HR team’s lack of comprehension about the working life of the school, as illustrated by the school’s HR contact telling teachers she was unavailable for meetings after three o’clock. The lack of collaboration and support by the HR team was experienced as highly restrictive by teachers, and was indicative of this group’s “bounded” rather than “cross-boundary” approach to communication (Fuller and Unwin, 2004a; Wenger-Trayner, et al., 2015).

Furthermore, the lack of adequate managerial training for the teachers by the HR department had repercussions for the development of the LSAs, as they were insufficiently line managed for an entire academic year. Thus, the actions of the HR group, which was an important participant in the shaping of the skills of Willowbank’s workforce, emerged as having a detrimental effect on the learning and development of these key members of the organisation’s workforce. This echoed Felstead et al’s (2009) observation that “systemic breakdowns and malfunctions within productive systems may impact on learning environments within organizations” (page 37). The lack of regard afforded the school by this corporate department was surprising, given that the charity’s raison d’etre was to provide educational support for children and young people with complex learning difficulties, and it was the staff at Willowbank who were of fundamental importance to this provision and the success of Cedars Trust.
8.5 The organisation of work and discretion

I have examined the various circumstances at the school that determined the availability of formal and non-formal learning opportunities for LSAs, and considered how different structural elements within Willowbank’s productive system shaped the school’s approach to the development of its workforce. At this point I move on to the third aspect of the Working as Learning Framework and the concept of discretion as proposed by its authors (Felstead, Fuller, Jewson and Unwin, 2009). This construct emerged as highly influential in shaping the learning outcomes for LSAs at three of the stages of production; these were the planning of pupils’ sessions, the delivery of the sessions, and the recording and evaluating of sessions. These activities mapped onto the three aspects of discretion identified by Felstead and colleagues (2009) in their framework:

*Discretion in the conception of work involves the extent to which employees have control over the aims and objectives of their work process*

*Discretion in work execution involves control over the way in which given objectives are attained and tasks are executed*

*Discretion in the evaluation of work outcomes involves taking responsibility for monitoring work outcomes*

(Felstead, et al., 2009, page 24, my emphasis)

8.5.1 Discretion in the conception of work

The first aspect of discretion in the WALF is that associated with the amount of authority employees have in the “conception” (or formation) of the “aims and objectives of their work process” (ibid). The LSAs had limited control over the content of pupils’ lesson plans and this was a source of dissatisfaction for these educators. Numerous LSAs said that teachers did not discuss the reasoning behind their pupil sessions with them, which meant newer staff went into sessions underprepared, lacking confidence and without a full understanding of the meaning of their work. More experienced staff were unhappy with the lack of discretion they could exercise, remarking that teachers did not listen to their comments, even though
they spent considerably more time with pupils. Furthermore, many LSAs had attended courses or undertaken diplomas and degrees and they wanted to share the results of their learning. In relation to the experienced paraeducators, Gallie, Felstead and Green’s point is of interest, “[T]he erosion of employees’ scope for decision-making was seen as destructive of the objective capacity for personal self-development” (2012, page 244). But responsibility for involvement in the formation of the work should not have rested with the teachers alone, because whilst some LSAs did seek out their teachers to discuss lesson plans, many LSAs did not speak to their teachers when they believed sessions needed changing, or they were unsure about the rationale for the activities planned for each lesson. The lack of ongoing discussion, between these two groups of important stakeholders within Willowbank’s productive system, had several consequences. The absence of face to face information sharing meant that LSAs were not fully informed about the pupils’ learning objectives, which risked impacting negatively on the substance and quality of the support provided. There was a further side to the lack of communication between the teacher and LSA in lesson planning and this was the risk that an LSA would implement their own ideas, which could undermine the aims of the learning objectives the teacher had in mind for the pupil, however well-intentioned the LSA’s actions were.

The lack of control LSAs had over the planning of pupil sessions, and their own lack of proactivity in speaking to their class teacher, would have different consequences if the person who had designed the plans was instrumental in their delivery or was closely monitoring the LSA putting the plans into action. This was not the case in the educational setting I studied and the ambiguity in approach to the affordance and exercise of discretion revealed a complicated picture where this construct was concerned and which has not been adequately addressed in the literature. This complex picture becomes more apparent as this chapter progresses.
Discretion in work execution

Discretion in work execution involves control over the way in which given objectives are attained and tasks are executed

(Felstead et al., 2009, page 24)

In contrast to the lack of influence and control the paraeducators had in the preparation of their pupils’ lesson plans, LSAs were afforded a substantial amount of discretion in how they managed the one-to-one pupil lessons. During these times these paraeducators worked with very little monitoring and supervision of their classroom practice by their class teacher. The differing results of the affordance of discretion was illustrated in the vignette about Hattie, the LSA, and her pupil Mary. Hattie used her initiative and adapted the sessions since she could see that Mary was ready to move on in her targets and adapted the lesson as a result. The outcome of Hattie’s actions led to her pupil making substantial progress in her communication skills in a short space of time. However other LSAs, when they were left to their own devices, did not approach their pupils’ sessions the same way usually because they were not adequately equipped to make assessments and decisions, and this resulted in the session targets being recorded as ‘red’ (that is, not achieved) and this could continue for some time, until the class teacher took action to rectify the situation.

Moreover, LSAs were afforded responsibility for the delivery of their pupils’ sessions irrespective of the amount of time they had been in post, and despite novice LSAs having had negligible opportunity to develop their SEND knowledge. This meant that new LSAs were delivering sessions with very little non-formal training and limited supervisory advice on which to draw. Furthermore, like their more experienced colleagues the newly recruited LSAs often worked with students in individual rooms, which meant that opportunities for on-the-job learning from other LSAs were scarce.

Although none of the LSAs were on apprenticeship schemes at the school, it is interesting to contemplate their situation in relation to an effective apprenticeship model of workplace learning (Hordern, 2015), where experienced and skilled colleagues are on hand for apprentices to “consult and observe” (Grugulis and
The novice LSAs at Willowbank were working in an environment where they had no separate identity as a learner (Fuller and Unwin, 2016; Wenger, 1998), as they were expected to fulfil the role of a fully-fledged worker from the beginning of their employment and whilst they did not wish to inhabit such an identity, they had little choice but to do so. This is in marked contrast to the contract researchers at a higher educational organisation, reported by Fuller and Unwin (2016), who had the necessary skills to progress, but found themselves “in the role of a permanent apprentice who never progresses to acquire the autonomy and discretion associated with a fully developed occupational identity and role as an independent researcher” (ibid, page 73), because of the constraints of the way the work was organised at the university. This illustrates one of the many paradoxes to emerge from my research, in that LSAs had a lack of involvement in the conception of factors that fundamentally shaped their work, that is, lesson planning for sessions the LSAs were responsible for delivering. Yet these paraeducators were expected to use their judgement - and were afforded high levels of autonomy - in its execution, which was a fundamentally important stage in the provision of educational support at Willowbank. And the exercise of judgement in the delivery of educational sessions was a significant undertaking, because LSAs needed to adapt the activities and their approach during the lessons in light of the response of their pupils, and this was not without difficulties given the complex nature of the students’ learning disabilities. Therefore, the ability to effectively manage this aspect of the work required considerable skill and knowledge, which - as numerous LSAs told me - takes time and training of both a formal and non-formal nature, the latter of which was notably absent.

8.5.3 Work execution: teachers’ non-contact time

Earlier in this chapter I wrote about the workload of Willowbank’s teachers and the limited amount of the time they had to supervise their LSAs. I want to return to that point here to specifically address how these educators used their non-contact and supernumerary time, the effect this had on the affordance of discretion for LSAs in the execution of their work, and the consequences for the learning and development of these paraeducators. Owing to the nature of the pupils’ learning difficulties, the teachers at the school were required to complete significant amounts of
documentation over and above routine information on pupil progress, such as safeguarding reports, details of the frequent contact with parents, calls and emails to local authorities. In addition, the multidisciplinary and multiagency nature of the educational support meant that teachers attended numerous meetings. Because of these demands, some teachers at Willowbank allowed these administrative aspects to permeate beyond their mandatory non-contact time into their supernumerate time, which should have been timetabled for teaching and when they were expected to work with pupils, model sessions and supervise the practice of LSAs. Consequently, this behaviour extended the absences from classrooms of these professional educators, even when they should have been available; such a practice added to the times the LSAs were expected to exercise levels of autonomy and responsibility incommensurate with their role. As I thought about this more closely it brought to mind the numerous texts on the nature of professionalism and the related literature on teachers’ autonomy (Edmond and Hayler, 2013; Goepel, 2012; Hall and McGinity, 2015). This literature discusses, for example, the results of workforce remodelling (Gunter, 2006; Parker, 2015) when teachers found themselves ceding not only routine administrative tasks to classroom support staff, but also relinquishing responsibilities of a pedagogical nature and the resultant negative impact on their perception of their professional identity (Houssart, 2013; Stevenson, 2007). And yet, whilst one would assume that the Willowbank teachers would feel dissatisfaction that their sphere of responsibility was compromised owing to the significant involvement of LSAs in the delivery of pupil lessons, it appeared that teachers were content to give up this key aspect of their professional role in a way that ran counter to the conclusions drawn in the literature. As I reflected on this, the writings on labour process theory came to mind (Bach, Kessler and Heron, 2006; Stevenson, 2007), which discuss Braverman’s work from the 1970s. In his work Braverman made the distinction between the intellectual contribution required in the conception of work tasks, and that of the manual role in the execution of work. The manager’s role was one of conceiving work processes, with the expectation on frontline workers to carry out (execute) the tasks prescribed to them. Whilst I do not intend to explore this substantive topic at length in this discussion, there were some aspects of the theory that resonated with what I had found at Willowbank, in particular that teachers appeared to differentiate between the different aspects of the work involved in providing educational support to pupils. When considering this in
relation to labour process theory, I maintain that teachers placed a higher value on
the *designing* of an individual education plan and the *planning* of one-to-one
sessions, which when examined through a labour process theory lens would be the
intellectual contribution to the work. And yet in the *delivery* of the one-to-one
lessons the teachers were content for an LSA to exercise a good deal of discretion,
which the teacher only intermittently monitored or supervised, akin to a production
line worker following a pre-determined process. In fact, whilst the term ‘*delivering a
lesson*’ is frequently used in educational parlance, there are substantial differences
between the delivery of a highly routinized and mechanistic process (such as
carrying out an activity on a production line) and that of providing educational
support to an individual with highly complex learning disabilities. ‘*Delivering a
lesson*’ is an undertaking that requires the knowledge and skill to react appropriately
and adapt the lesson content to the pupil’s responses, which can be very subtle and
difficult to interpret. And yet, the challenges faced by the LSAs in managing the
pupils’ sessions were rarely acknowledged by the class teachers, who issued
individual lesson plans with the expectation that they could be *delivered* according to
their intentions. Thus, in the minds of teachers, the discretion afforded their staff was
constrained by what was written in the plans and they did not take into consideration
the reality of what was required. In fact, the actuality was a significant pedagogical
undertaking by the LSAs, who felt ill-equipped to carry out what was needed. This
highlights the multiple dimensions of the concept of discretion and the complexity of
how it plays out for different workers within an organisation.

This takes me on to consider the training session I did with the teachers, when there
was a noticeable lack of discussion about the performance of their LSAs in relation
to their classroom practice and level of knowledge. When the teachers talked about
developmental goals for their individual paraeducators it was in terms of improving
IT skills and making resources in a timely manner, yet it was the quality of the
pedagogical practice and the application of the knowledge of the LSAs that
determined the standard of the pupils’ educational provision on a daily basis. I
believe that the disconnect in teachers’ minds between the planning (‘intellectual’
work) and delivery (‘manual’ work) of pupil sessions led some teachers to use their
supernumerate time for the completion of the multitude of non-classroom based
activities that they had to address, in the knowledge that the one-to-one sessions
were being ‘delivered’ by their paraeducators. Of course, this was a significant difference between teachers working in mainstream settings and the teachers at Willowbank, because these teachers *could* be absent from their classrooms during what should have been their supernumerate teaching time. This illustrates that the affordance and exercise of discretion in work activities is a construct that cannot easily be compartmentalised, and the complexity of which has not been adequately addressed in the literature I have reviewed.

Towards the end of my fieldwork it was clear that the use of supernumerary time for activities other than teaching was not condoned by the Deputy Head and was something she would address during her transition to becoming Headteacher. This change should result in an increase in the time teachers are present in classrooms not only working with pupils, but also training their LSAs and helping them to develop their pedagogical practice.

**8.5.4 Discretion in the evaluation of work outcomes**

*Discretion in the evaluation of work outcomes involves taking responsibility for monitoring work outcomes*

(Felstead et al, 2009, page 24)

When considering the stages of production of the educational provision at Willowbank, the fourth stage was that of ‘recording and evaluating’ pupils’ sessions. There was an expectation at the school that LSAs would take responsibility for the daily monitoring of their pupils’ achievements, which required them to reflect on the approach and suitability of their practice. The level of responsibility taken by LSAs in such evaluations varied across the school and I was aware that many LSAs did reflect on how their sessions had gone and were conscientious in their assessment of pupil progress. However, there were also LSAs who were not so attentive in their appraisal of lessons, the assessment of pupil progress and reporting back to their teachers, either because they lacked the necessary skills, confidence and experience, or - in a minority of instances - because they had a less diligent approach to their job.
Meaningful monitoring and evaluation of pupil lessons was also influenced by the electronic recording form on the school’s Exchange intranet system. This electronic artefact did not require narrative input of more than a few words, with its focus on green and red colour coding to illustrate whether targets had, or had not, been achieved. It was not surprising, therefore, that when LSAs sat down at the end of the day to complete the numerous electronic forms required of them (along with any behaviour management forms that had to be done), the ensuing information was somewhat cursory. The limited availability of computers meant that staff were always waiting to use them and this added to the pressure to finish lesson recording as swiftly as possible. Additionally, LSAs had other tasks they needed to complete in the thirty minutes they had available at the end of the day, such as preparing resources for the following day and checking equipment. The outcome was that this important aspect of the work was not given priority as the LSAs did not have sufficient time to reflect on their practice, contemplate any areas they felt they needed to develop, nor ask for advice (Ohlsson, 2013). There were practical steps that could have been taken by the school to help this situation, such as investing in additional computers, laptops or tablets, so that there was not a constant queue of LSAs waiting to complete their recording. Completing lesson recording by hand at the end of each session may also have encouraged LSAs to reflect more thoroughly on what had gone well and what required attention, when the information was fresh in their minds and they were not under pressure from their colleagues to vacate equipment. This further highlights the lack of attention given to the wider aspects of workplace learning at Willowbank, because whilst LSAs had access to numerous avenues of formal learning, there was insufficient focus given to the evaluation of work, and negligible time for reflection and discussion. These are all aspects of workplace learning that can be facilitated by effective managers (Matsuo, 2012).

Discretion emerged as a crucial theme at Willowbank and what was of particular significance was that there were numerous examples that ran counter to what might be expected from the literature, since many of the situations where LSAs were afforded discretion did not translate into the type of learning that could be termed as expansive in the way Fuller and colleagues (2007) describe: “expansive in the sense that their employees experience diverse forms of participation and, hence, are more likely to foster learning at work” (Fuller, Unwin, Felstead, Jewson and Kakavelakis,
2007, page 743). There have been many examples in this thesis, which have illustrated the LSAs were not in situations during their working day that facilitated meaningful learning experiences.

Furthermore, whilst authors highlight that the affordance of autonomy in the workplace is associated with increased job satisfaction (Grant, 2013; Read and Laschinger, 2015) and reduced task discretion is linked to health problems such as high blood pressure (Gallie, Felstead and Green, 2012), the levels of autonomy and responsibility bestowed on Willowbank’s LSAs resulted in a backdrop of stress and frustration, which again is not in keeping with the conclusions in the literature. This situation was made all the more problematic and stressful when one recalls that any control over the LSAs’ work was subject to the last-minute changes in the Comms book, and the resultant unpredictability brought into their working lives by this organisational artefact.

However, whilst it was clear that numerous difficulties arose because of the amount of discretion LSAs were expected to employ from the outset of their employment, what also emerged was the inspirational work of LSAs, such as Hattie, Laura and Debbie. These LSAs had considerable experience and knowledge and used their discretion to support their students to progress along their learning journey, and to help them to develop skills that many agencies outside the school had thought were unachievable.

**8.6 Other factors that influenced workplace learning**

There were aspects that had an impact on workplace learning at Willowbank that were not apparent in the WALF, or which required expansion, in order to fully articulate the LSAs’ experience of workplace learning at the school.

**8.6.1 Layout of the school and informal learning**

In the WALF working spaces have been considered in relation to how they shape employee learning, for example the software engineering company described by Felstead and colleagues (2009) where the open plan and glass fronted offices created “a strong spirit of collegiality” (page 131). The thought of collegiality brings me
onto the layout of the school building, and the isolated nature of the classrooms, which had a highly restrictive impact on the non-formal and informal learning opportunities for the LSAs. For many employees, there are opportunities for informal learning because their work enables them to pause during their daily routine and hold conversations, for example at desks, in corridors, at coffee machines and on shop floors (Waring and Bishop, 2010). This was not the case at Willowbank where the physical layout of the school served to intensify the challenges for LSA learning, since it had not been built as a school for students with complex learning disabilities and was unsuitable for the purpose it had to serve for both pupils and staff. This dissertation has provided examples of the barriers to non-formal employee learning caused by the geography of the school, such as members from the same class working on different corridors and in separate rooms some distance from each other, which rendered possibilities for communication and observation (Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2011) difficult at best, and in many cases unfeasible. Furthermore, staff were limited in how much time they could stop and seek advice from colleagues who they met whilst walking around school, because they were always supporting pupils, whose routine could not be easily (or in some cases safely) interrupted, and thus the ‘watercooler’ or ‘backstage’ chat commonplace in other organisations (Waring and Bishop, 2010) was not an option for the paraeducator workforce at the school. There are parallels with the experiences of employees who work at home and report feelings of isolation through lack of interaction with work colleagues (Felstead and Jewson, 2012), but unlike the LSAs these workers “combat these feelings by building short breaks into their schedule ... making chatty telephone calls to catch up with colleagues, participating in work-based chat rooms and bulletin boards, and encouraging visits by co-workers” (ibid, page 152). It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that employees occupying a space geographically distant from their place of work could communicate easily with their colleagues, and yet the experience of the LSAs at Willowbank - who were in the same building as their peers - was essentially more remote.

Whilst not underestimating the logistical difficulties in attempting to overcome the problems of the geography the school, the impression conveyed at Willowbank was one of a resigned acceptance that there was little that could be done, and given the other demands on staff, there seemed to be scant opportunity - or energy - to try and
find a solution, other than to wait until finances for a new school could be secured. Nevertheless, from my sustained observations, it was clear that the limitation on communication caused by the physical structure of the building markedly diminished the opportunities employees had to engage in valuable interactive learning (Billett, 2004; Felstead, Fuller, Jewson and Unwin, 2009). Such opportunities would have benefitted LSA practice irrespective of the amount of experience they had (Campbell, Verenikina and Herrington, 2009).

8.6.2 The influence of individual LSAs

Within the WALF the learning opportunities available to individual workers, and their ability to shape organisational learning more widely, are closely bound to the productive system within which the organisation is located. Felstead and colleagues recognise that “by placing so much importance on the concept of the productive system, we will no doubt be criticized for being overly deterministic and allowing structural concerns to dominate” (Felstead et al, 2009, page 198). Whilst this comment seems to concede that the contribution of employees in shaping their learning environment is at risk of being underplayed in the WALF, in fact the importance of the learning history and experiences of employees is clearly acknowledged by the WALF’s inclusion of the concept of ‘learning territories’:

*The character and scope of individuals’ learning territories influences how they perceive and respond to opportunities and barriers institutionalized in the various learning environments they encounter at the workplace*

(Felstead, et al., 2009, page 30)

The learning territories of the LSAs at Willowbank came through in their conversations with me. They spoke about their experiences of being taught at school and how they had not been interested in studying, and then they came to Willowbank and the work sparked their interest and they welcomed the learning opportunities the school provided. What is more, from the numerous conversations I had with LSAs it was clear that their personal learning backgrounds made these paraeducators mindful of how they approached not only their own learning, but also the way they shared information with others. For example, Debbie (the autism champion) made her
sessions with her colleagues highly interactive, because she had dyslexia and struggled to take in written information, and so her past experiences shaped how she engaged with her colleagues. Debbie was also keen to ensure that her highly interactive sessions mitigated against the restrictive stance adopted by the trainer at the in-house autism course, which was delivered in the form of lectures. Laura, the habilitation specialist, had been careful not to make her sessions “formal” because she knew this would inhibit discussion between attendees (Fuller, Unwin, Felstead, Jewson and Kakavelakis, 2007), since many of the LSAs did not have positive memories of their secondary school classrooms. Indeed, the approach of both of these LSAs in the way they conveyed information was praised by their colleagues.

And yet, I must recognise that the individuals who agreed to be interviewed in my research were those who had an interest in the subject and wanted to share their views with me. From my observations around the school, and discussions between LSAs and teachers in staff rooms, it was apparent that not all LSAs were as interested in their learning and development as those with whom I had the majority of my interactions. Accordingly, I could not ascertain what shaped their level of engagement, nor how their personal learning histories influenced their approach to their development (Bryson, Pajo, Ward and Mallon, 2009; Felstead and Unwin, 2016).

8.6.3 School Leadership

The educational literature discusses the central role school leaders play in the creation of learning environments for their staff (Balshaw, 2010; Day et al., 2010; Campbell, 2014) and highlights that “the quality of leadership is a critical variable in securing positive school and learner outcomes” (Bush and Glover, 2014, page 567). However, Matsuo (2012) noted that the multitude of organisational demands placed on leaders made their ability to provide ongoing learning opportunities for employees problematic. Accordingly, by framing my analysis within the WALF I could identify the organisational pressures, from within and outside the school, that shaped the way the Headteacher and Deputy Head addressed the learning and development of the LSA workforce at Willowbank (Felstead et al., 2009; Felstead, Fuller, Jewson and Unwin, 2011) and scrutinise the learning culture that resulted (Eraut, 2014). The WALF also stressed the value of examining how work was
organised at the school, with particular emphasis on the affordance and exercise of discretion and autonomy (Billett, 2015; Fuller and Unwin, 2016; Inanc, et al., 2015). The affordance of discretion with regard to the work of the LSAs emerged as something that the senior managers at Willowbank predominantly delegated to their teachers, leaving them to determine how much autonomy their LSAs were permitted. The Headteacher and Deputy Head also assigned the senior teachers the responsibility of the daily reallocation of LSA resource because of staff shortages, which they recorded in the Comms book. The impact on LSA learning and development, as a result of the approach of the senior leaders in this regard, was overwhelmingly restrictive (Felstead, et al., 2009: Fuller and Unwin, 2004; Fuller and Unwin, 2016).

However, in contrast to the conclusions in the literature with regard to the development of classroom support staff (Brock and Carter, 2015; Alborz, Pearson, Farrell and Howes, 2009), the Headteacher and Deputy Head at Willowbank clearly understood the need for paraeducators to have access to learning opportunities if they were to improve their practice, and ensure the pupils achieved their learning goals. Additionally, the Headteacher was keen to encourage LSAs to form learning communities within the school (Printy, 2008; Fuller and Unwin, 2004; Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trainner, et al., 2015) through the appointment of subject champions. However, as time progressed the momentum for these non-formal learning forums lessened because subject champions struggled to give sufficient time to their role, and furthermore LSA attendance waned because of the demands of their work. Whilst the Headteacher was aware of the problems, the initial attention she had managed to give to the initiatives was not sustained and it needed the Headteacher to help the subject champions re-motivate staff, but this did not happen in any substantive way. The cessation of Intervenor meetings meant that the emergence of this burgeoning community of practice stalled, since there was no opportunity to engage in the “social process of negotiating competence in a domain over time” (Farnsworth, et al., 2016). Moreover, during my fieldwork there was little evidence of a school leadership team that the Headteacher could utilise to share the management of the challenges the school faced, an aspect noted as fundamentally important by Baker (2009), in his study with headteachers from special schools.
The restrictive outcome for LSA learning was also perpetuated by the lack of acknowledgement of the central importance of sustained opportunities for participative learning (Printy, 2008), because far more attention was paid to the completion of qualifications. The focus on qualifications was influenced by demands from the DfE, local authorities and Cedars Trust. Regarding this latter point, the lack of challenge from the Headteacher to the Trust’s Executive Leadership Team on their mandatory approach to NVQs was puzzling, when she had made clear her dissatisfaction with the qualification in a conversation with me. Moreover, in her position on the Executive Leadership Team - an important network within Willowbank’s productive system – she might have been expected to encourage dialogue on this matter (Hodkinson, P. and Hodkinson, H., 2004).

What is more, the main focus of the Headteacher was the development of individuals, (such as Pip the hearing impairment champion and Laura the habilitation specialist) and specific groups of LSAs (such as the Intervenors), rather than directing attention on raising the performance of the LSA workforce as a whole. Such a fragmentary approach, whilst expansive for certain members of staff, meant that the development of those LSAs who were less conspicuous went unacknowledged. This restrictive approach was perpetuated by the lack of the teachers’ presence in the one-to-one pupil sessions.

The promotion of the Deputy Head to the post of Headteacher, although not due to commence until the following academic year, saw her gradually transition to the role during the time of my fieldwork. The stance adopted by the Deputy Head varied in several ways from that of the Headteacher, for example she involved the three senior teachers in her decision making from an early stage. Promoting this type of participation was indicative of an expansive attitude to the employee learning (Inanc, et al., 2015) and demonstrated she was keen to develop the leadership skills of these middle managers to raise the standards of the school (Thorpe and Bennett-Powell, 2014). The Deputy Head expected the senior teachers to help her to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the teachers and the LSAs at Willowbank, and this undertaking brought with it a perceptible shift in the approach to the learning and development of the whole workforce, as the skills required to undertake the role of an LSA were systematically identified and separated from those expected from the
teachers. As the discussions progressed between her senior team, the Deputy Head made explicit the important function the new performance management process had to play in facilitating the realignment of responsibilities (Bach, et al., 2006). The introduction of this new process was too late for my fieldwork, but it is to be hoped that a more methodical way of addressing the learning and development needs of all staff would highlight the importance of providing more participative learning opportunities in the workplace for the LSAs (Eraut, 2014; Felstead and Unwin, 2016). It is also to be hoped that the performance management process will prompt meaningful discussions between teachers and their class staff about the provision of both formal and non-formal methods as ways to advance the learning and development for all of the members of the LSA workforce (Day, Sammons, Hopkins, Harris et al., 2010).

8.7 The educational model

Using the WALF as an analytical lens, I have been able to identify how the structures within Willowbank’s productive system influenced the learning environment for LSAs and how senior managers at the school, and at Cedars Trust, privileged formal approaches over those of a situational nature. The role of the HR department, a key stakeholder in the maintenance and improvement of the skills of the workforce at the school, emerged as a restrictive presence in the disordered way the new performance management process was introduced. Furthermore, I uncovered the organisational contradictions in the affordance and exercise of discretion that occurred during the three stages at the centre of Willowbank’s productive system that, for the most part, disadvantaged the LSAs and left them feeling ill equipped for the work they were expected to do, and concerned for the progress of their pupils.

Drawing together all of the findings from my research at the school, it became clear that the pivotal phenomenon in shaping the learning outcomes for LSAs was the one-to-one educational model in place at Willowbank. This highly specialised method of support, and a fundamentally important stage in the production of educational provision at the school, had been adopted by Willowbank some years previously when the school changed its policy to admit students with very complex learning disabilities. This specialised educational model meant that LSAs habitually worked
on their own with their pupil to deliver the individualised lesson plans with the class teacher working in a supernumerary capacity throughout the day, alternating attention to the different students and their individual sessions. Consequently, LSAs were afforded significant amounts of discretion because the way in which the teachers worked meant the paraeducators were consistently the only pedagogue in the classroom. Moreover, because they worked in isolation, the classroom practice of the LSAs went unmonitored and unsupervised by their teacher and their peers for considerable periods of time.

Because of the isolated nature of the LSAs’ individual support for their pupils, many of the observations and recommendations in the literature that relate to situational learning (Felstead and Unwin, 2016; Kyndt, Dochy and Nijs, 2009; Wenger, 1998), and which stress the importance of collective learning for workers “through their everyday activities and interactions” (Billett, 2015, page 214) are highly problematic for employees at Willowbank. Whilst the one-to-one educational support model was established because of the characteristics of the pupils’ learning difficulties, this way of working did not serve the learning needs of the educators who worked with them since they had very few opportunities for on-the-job learning. As a result, this way of managing the work at the school led to a highly restrictive learning experience for the LSAs.

Furthermore, and importantly, the educational model in place at Willowbank made the learning environment for LSAs very different from that in mainstream schools and highlights that paraeducators who work in such isolated and demanding circumstances require alternative ways to be found, if their learning and development needs are to be met and the quality of their practice is to be assured. Supporting LSAs in their learning can also be handled by means of the performance management process, whereby the training responsibilities of line managers should be clearly documented and assessed.

With regard to the training of novice LSAs, an appropriate place to start would be to adopt a model whereby new starters are recognised as learners for a sufficient period of time (Fuller and Unwin, 2016; Fuller and Unwin, 2004; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2011), for example shadowing experienced colleagues and working in a supervised
manner. However, this would require funding additional LSA resource at a time when finances in the SEND sector are highly constrained (TUC, March 2015).

8.8 Conclusion

Framing my analysis within the WALF illustrated how the structural elements linked to Willowbank shaped the learning culture for LSAs, in beneficial and detrimental ways. When applying the construct of discretion, particularly in relation to the productive stages of the school’s educational provision, it became apparent that the affordance of autonomy was not associated with expansive learning outcomes for LSAs and as such did not have a positive impact on job satisfaction, counter to the conclusions made in the literature (Billett, 2015; Felstead et al., 2009; Felstead, Gallie, Green and Inanc, 2015).

Drawing together the numerous factors at Willowbank that shaped the learning environment for LSAs and mapping them onto Fuller and Unwin’s (2004) workforce development paradigm proved to be problematic, because the situation at the school emerged as highly paradoxical. For example, although the school had an ostensibly expansive attitude to the provision of formal learning, the motivation for enrolling LSAs on courses was not always driven by employee- or pupil-need, but from a requirement generated from stakeholders on the periphery of the school. As a result, decisions were not always made from a position of knowledge about the substance of the work the LSAs did. However, in other circumstances external demand for qualifications proved to be highly beneficial for the development of LSA knowledge and practice, such as local authority pressure for LSAs to qualify as Intervenors. The expansive approach with regard to formal learning could also be seen in the support by the school’s senior managers for individual LSAs to study for qualifications over and above those identified as mandatory at the school. However, those LSAs who had attended off-site courses had little chance to share their newly acquired knowledge with others, nor indeed to fully develop their practice in light of what they had learnt, because situations where colleagues could observe and provide feedback were rare. But, there were LSAs at Willowbank who had attended courses and gained qualifications who attempted to navigate the barriers to learning at the school and liaise with their colleagues to share and improve their own practice and
that of the group (Felstead and Unwin, 2016; Printy, 2008), although in the wake of inadequate resourcing this proved to be a difficult undertaking.

The lack of a holistic strategy for the development of the LSA workforce as a whole, meant that consistency of practice across Willowbank could not be guaranteed. However, in her determination to apply to the new performance management process effectively, the Deputy Head had the potential to address the capabilities and practice of all LSAs (and teachers) and it was to be hoped that, as an outcome of this change, opportunities for non-formal learning would be given more priority. In particular, the teachers needed to recognise the role they had to play in training their LSAs on-the-job, since monitoring and feedback on how the paraeducators performed was evident from only a few of these line managers. The need for proactive training interventions from teachers was all the more necessary, given that the physical layout of the school only served to further disrupt workplace learning.

Thus, there were numerous factors that affected the opportunities for workplace learning at the school, however, it was the one-to-one educational model that fundamentally destabilised the opportunities LSAs had for meaningful workplace learning. Whilst Willowbank’s educational model had originated because of the learning difficulties experienced by pupils, it was inherently flawed from a workplace learning perspective since the essential social and participative aspects required for employee learning and development were constantly missing.
CHAPTER NINE

Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

I began this dissertation with a letter from the mother of a pupil at Willowbank school, in which she eloquently expressed the impact that knowledgeable educational support has made to her son, Michael, and to the people who care about him. The difference in the ability of those responsible for the education of Michael is made explicit in her letter and captures the essence of my research, which sought to answer the following question:

What factors influence whether Learning Support Assistants are equipped to provide specialised educational support to pupils with complex learning difficulties?

And yet, as I began the process of addressing my research question it was evident that there was limited information available in the SEND, and wider educational literature, to inform my endeavours. The SEND literature focused primarily on training courses for LSAs, with scant consideration of the alternative approaches to learning, which could be used to help this group of paraeducators to develop their knowledge and skills. The principal discussion in the broader educational literature concentrated on teaching assistants in mainstream settings and their ability to deliver the necessary pedagogical support to pupils with SEN, and with the primary aim of increasing their attainment in national educational tests and examinations. The mutual conclusion made by authors was that the learning and development of paraeducators, in special and mainstream environments, was not being adequately addressed. Despite this recognition, and the acknowledgement of the consequences for the quality of pedagogical support for pupils, there was little to suggest that efforts were being made to resolve the problem.
Because of the scarcity of information in the literature pertaining to my area, I looked for insights from writings on organisational learning across different disciplines to inform my work and considered how it might relate to my own area of interest. The lack of priority given to non-formal learning was a key theme across these texts, with opportunities for participative learning emerging as an important feature, for example in the research exploring Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) and the expansive-restrictive nature of learning environments as advanced by Fuller and Unwin (2004a). Whilst the extent to which organisations adopted formal and non-formal approaches was clearly significant, this aspect alone did not capture the reasons why LSAs were not being afforded learning and development provision appropriate to their needs. It became apparent that the subject required scrutiny from a wider perspective. The conceptual and analytical approach advocated in the Working as Learning Framework (Felstead, et al., 2009) was extremely informative in this respect. With its incorporation of the concepts of systems of production, discretion, and learning environments and territories, this theory of workplace learning offered me the opportunity to scrutinise the situation regarding LSA learning and development from a much wider perspective. Through my exploration of this “dynamic complexity” (Felstead, et al., 2009, page 190), I have identified the influences that shaped the workplace learning environment of LSAs at a special school. Moreover, through my use of the WALF and my consideration of other theories of learning, I have added to the discussion on the quality of educational provision and how it can be produced. This is an important contribution of my thesis.

9.2 Summary of my research methodology and findings

I explored the issues by employing a workplace ethnography of a single special school and this approach meant I could gather a wealth of information, from different sources and by different means. More specifically my aim was to look:
To the best of my knowledge this is the first application of the WALF in a special school context. During my fieldwork, my frequent presence amongst the staff allowed me to observe whether the narrative of individuals corresponded to the working life I witnessed around the school and the impact this had on workplace learning opportunities for the LSAs. For example, the ambiguous way teachers treated LSAs in their insistence that they wanted paraeducators to take more initiative and yet they stepped in to take over tasks they had assigned to them. I was also able to see first-hand the challenges encapsulated in organisational artefacts, for example the Comms book and its reactive reallocation of LSA resource.

Furthermore, I observed how organisational documentation limited the developmental opportunities of the paraeducators, because these artefacts had been designed by protagonists external to the school without sufficient consideration of those who would use them. But I was also able to witness the positive reaction from LSAs when they were able to gain practical training in the workplace, such as guidance from the rehabilitation specialist in how to support their partially sighted pupils to navigate their way around the school building. I attended many meetings and interviewed numerous staff, which provided insights into the way different employees approached their learning and that of their colleagues. The information I collected also illuminated how stakeholders linked to the school’s productive system shaped the culture of learning at the school. It was also clear from the data I gathered that the workforce aspired to provide high quality educational support for their pupils and that their efforts were frustrated by pressures that were, for the most part, outside their control.

However, and significantly, the overarching problem for workplace learning for LSAs was the fundamentally restrictive learning environment created by senior management owing to the one-to-one educational model in place at the school. This mode of working did not permit staff to engage in the all-important non-formal and informal aspects of learning, and limited the extent to which the learning gained by other means could be assimilated into the classroom practice of the paraeducator.
workforce. Towards the end of my fieldwork there was a tentative discussion between senior managers and teachers at the school about developing opportunities for students to work in small groups with their peers. This dialogue had arisen because of concerns that some pupils were becoming over dependent on individual LSAs because of the one-to-one educational model and yet, interestingly, no reference was made to the potential benefits of this initiative for LSA development. Whilst some of the classes could incorporate this way of working more easily than others, indeed it was already in place for a few lessons, it would be untenable for other classes as the extreme levels of anxiety many of the pupils would experience would be a serious risk to safety. Whilst the focus for this potential change centred on pupil development, it was clear from my research that working in groups with colleagues (even if only for short periods of time) would provide the LSAs (and teachers) with valuable, expansive learning opportunities. When considered in terms of a potential LSA community of practice, redefining the way some lessons were organised would afford LSAs the opportunity to learn through social interactions with their peers, a practice that has been identified as valuable not only by Wenger (1998), but many other researchers. However, whilst some of the pupils at Willowbank would be able to tolerate, and derive benefit from, interacting with their peers, it remained that for the majority of time the educational support would continue to be in one-to-one settings.

I am aware that I did not seek the views of certain stakeholders whose opinions would have provided valuable insights into the topic of this thesis and these were parents and school governors. As a lone researcher, I would not have had sufficient time to interview parents or governors, or to analyse the additional data generated. Furthermore, I did not contemplate involving the pupils in my study as there would have been extensive ethical considerations, and to undertake research that involved the pupils at Willowbank would have required a different methodological approach and have been a significant undertaking. However, a future study capturing the views of stakeholders such as parents, governors and local authorities, would be a worthwhile undertaking. Parents would be able to give their opinions about the quality of the educational support their children receive, and comment on the extent to which they differentiate between the contribution of teachers and LSAs. The level of knowledge of the governing body regarding the training provision offered to
paraeducators would provide insights as to whether these stakeholders are actively involved in LSA development. In addition, whether governors take an active role in helping senior leaders deal with the demands of managing a school that have an impact on the learning environment experienced by LSAs. The views of local authority staff would provide an insight into their understanding of the specialist nature of the support required at special schools, and how they believe LSAs are best equipped to fulfil their role.

A final point when mentioning the limitations of my research is the fact that it focused on one school. My response is that through my use of the WALF I have been able to identify the different processes that affected workplace learning, and as such what I have uncovered could be applied to other educational settings.

**9.3 Reflections on the WALF**

Through my use of the WALF as an analytical tool I could approach the subject of LSA learning and development from a comprehensive standpoint. By contemplating my findings through the lens of this framework I was able to reflect on the numerous factors that influenced whether Willowbank’s LSAs were equipped to provide specialised educational support. These influences included stakeholders such as Cedars Trust’s Human Resources department and local authorities, the effectiveness of teachers as line managers, in addition to the part played by formal and non-formal learning opportunities. As a result of the extensive scope of my research, my thesis has shown why the existing literature on LSA learning has yielded findings that have been of limited benefit to this important, and under-researched, area. Furthermore, as my fieldwork progressed, it became increasingly apparent that my adoption of an ethnographic approach allowed me to examine the various concepts within the WALF assiduously and enabled me to uncover contradictions, which would not have emerged through less immersive means. For example, the contradiction in the ostensibly expansive nature of the learning culture at Willowbank, such as the amount of formal learning provided and the wealth of training leaflets and posters, and the more restrictive environment beneath the surface, for example the lack of participative learning, inadequate teacher supervision and the detrimental effect of the layout of the school.
My thesis has also extended my understanding of the WALF in a number of areas, enabling me to develop several aspects of this framework. For example, the physical layout of a workplace has been noted as contributing to an expansive learning environment, through the promotion of a collegiate atmosphere amongst workers. However, much of the focus on restrictive learning environments has centred on employees who work remotely without ready access to their colleagues. My research has illustrated that workers can have highly restrictive learning experiences whilst working in close proximity to each other because the physical layout of a building impedes employee interaction. Additionally, my thesis has demonstrated that there is a risk of unintended - and detrimental - consequences on the learning experiences of one group of workers when the occupational activities of another group are prioritised and enforced by outside agencies. This was evidenced by the necessity for teachers to obtain a postgraduate SEND qualification and having DfE mandated planning, preparation and assessment time, both of which kept them away from their classrooms and limited the amount of non-formal learning available for their LSAs. In addition, discretion emerged as a very rich construct in my thesis and this was not only for the LSAs, but also for the teachers. I contemplate the ways in which my thesis extended this notion in the following section.

9.3.1 Discretion

My research illustrated that the concept of discretion is more nuanced than would appear to be the case from the literature relating to the WALF and there are two aspects, in particular, which are worthy of reiteration. Firstly, how discretion was understood by the LSAs and, secondly, how the affordance of discretion by teachers appeared to undermine their own level of responsibility as the professional pedagogues at the school.

At Willowbank, the amount of discretion afforded LSAs did not result in positive learning experiences and subsequent development of their knowledge or practice, nor did it lead to increased job satisfaction. These findings run counter to the conclusions in the literature. The affordance of discretion was particularly striking in the substantial amount of responsibility LSAs were given in the management of the one-to-one pupil sessions. Not only was their exposure to on-the-job learning extremely limited (because their class teachers were elsewhere), but the speed with
which LSAs were expected to manage the sessions meant that they were ill-equipped to do so. My research, therefore, illustrates that the construct of discretion needs to be examined within the particular context of the organisation being studied and the way in which work is organised and managed.

The second point relates to my finding that LSAs exercised a substantial amount of discretion in the pupils’ one-to-one sessions, with the notable observation that the teachers were comfortable ceding this fundamental aspect of their role. I considered this finding in relation to Braverman’s distinction between the intellectual contribution in the conception of work and that of the manual role in the execution of work, and the apparent differentiation made by the teachers in the planning (the intellectual aspect) and delivery (the manual aspect) of pupil sessions. The significant challenges faced by the LSAs in managing the pupils’ sessions were rarely acknowledged by the class teachers, who issued individual lesson plans with the expectation that they could be delivered according to their intentions. Thus, in the minds of teachers, the discretion afforded their staff was constrained by what was written in the plans and they did not take into consideration the reality of what was required. In fact, the actuality was a significant pedagogical undertaking by the LSAs, who felt ill-equipped to carry out what was needed. This highlights the multiple dimensions of the concept of discretion and the complexity of how it plays out for different workers within an organisation.

The concept of discretion that emerged from this research, in relation to the work of LSAs, has echoes from the literature on the extent to which the position of teachers has become one of “compliant operatives” (Hall and McGinity, 2015; Kennedy, 2007). From this standpoint, organisational control of the work of teachers is “achieved through the detailed prescription [of their performance] ... leaving little to practitioner judgement or discretion” (Reeves, 2007, page 57). Perhaps it could be said that teachers also view their LSAs as “compliant operatives”, although as this thesis has shown, this is a misunderstanding of the working lives of these employees. Such a misrepresentation results in a lack of acknowledgement of the training that is needed for these paraeducators to be properly equipped for the pedagogical responsibilities they are afforded. What is more, it would be interesting to explore in future work why teachers appeared to apply a notion of “compliant operatives” so
readily to their paraeducators, since this has been a highly unwelcome development when applied to teachers.

9.4 Implications for policy and practice

By identifying the processes that shaped the school’s approach to LSA development, I aimed to inform a wider audience of SEND policy makers and practitioners about how they can create and foster learning opportunities that are relevant to this specialist group of paraeducators. In doing so I have identified how LSAs can be equipped to knowledgably fulfil the significant pedagogical demands of their role, which in turn affects the quality of their educational provision.

There are a number of implications from my research that can inform educational policy and practice more widely. For example, school leaders must be proactive in the identification of the different stakeholders within their organisation’s wider structural hierarchy, such as local authorities, and consider the impact of the demands of these groups on the learning environment at their school. It is by recognising these wider influences that efforts can be directed at influencing decision makers and ensuring that the demands of stakeholders are actively managed.

Furthermore, in order to facilitate staff development, school leaders should ensure that the views of the workforce are sought, for example when new policies are being drafted that will directly affect how work is organised and responsibilities assigned. What is more, by canvassing the views of the different groups within the system, senior managers are more able to define the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the school’s educational provision. To illustrate this point, an issue at Willowbank was the insufficient acknowledgement by those higher up the organisational structure that teachers had a vital role to play in on-the-job training of staff. Another problem I identified was the inadequate amount of thought given to the knowledge and skills of experienced paraeducators and the subsequent lack of discretion they could exercise in the design of the pupil sessions they were expected to deliver. This echoes the commentary by Fuller, Unwin, Felstead et al., (2007) that the position of workers within an organisation’s hierarchy not only affects their access to learning, but also “the extent to, and manner in which, their learning and knowledge are recognised” (ibid, page 744).
There was not an apprenticeship scheme in place at Willowbank, but this model of workplace learning could have a valuable role to play in ensuring that the formal and non-formal learning needs of novice paraeducators are met. Indeed, given the lack of training for teaching assistants who work with pupils with SEN in mainstream schools, an effective apprentice scheme would suit the needs of paraeducators who work in different educational contexts. The value of apprenticeships, including those in place for teaching assistants in mainstream schools, has been questioned in the literature and significant effort would be needed to ensure such a scheme met the needs of specialist paraeducators. However, it was notable that during my research a sizeable group of LSAs demonstrated that they were capable of delivering on-the-job training that was relevant to, and valued by, their colleagues. A school’s involvement in an apprenticeship scheme would also provide a further means by which class teachers would have to become actively involved in monitoring and supporting the practice of their staff. Consideration would also need to be given to the problem of the relevance of the current NVQs in Supporting Teaching and Learning for LSAs and teaching assistants who support pupils with complex learning difficulties. This could be addressed following the change to the General Conditions of Recognition (Ofqual, 2015) since this modification permits awarding bodies to “design qualifications that meet the needs of those who use them” (ibid, page 7).

I have emphasised that finding and implementing effective ways to fulfil the learning and development needs of LSAs (and teaching assistants who support pupils with SEN) is fundamental in order to guarantee the standard of their pedagogical knowledge and practice. However, there are also other reasons to ensure that these paraeducators are adequately supported to carry out their work, even though these measures would involve financial costs in these fiscally constrained times. But a balance needs to be struck, because if proper learning and development strategies are not in place then retaining these specialist educators becomes problematic, with the result that schools must perpetually fund the costs of recruitment campaigns and expensive agency staff. Furthermore, with an incessant turnover within the LSA workforce there are few opportunities for communities of practice to develop, leading to limited chances for the emergence of shared repertoires of resources and experiences that facilitate workplace learning.
There is another reason for schools to ensure they provide an appropriate and supportive learning environment for their paraeducators and this is as a result of demographic changes. The number of people in the UK with learning disabilities is increasing owing to the rise in very premature babies surviving into adulthood and because of the growth in the proportion of English adults who belong to ethnic communities where there is a prevalence of severe learning difficulties in their offspring. Consequently, it follows that the demand for LSAs will continue to rise. It is vital, therefore, that these paraeducators are afforded appropriate prospects for learning if individuals are to enter and remain in the LSA workforce and the constant backdrop of resignations is to be avoided.

Special school leaders also need to have a dialogue with policy makers higher up the structural hierarchy, such as the DfE and local authorities, to enlighten them that nationally recognised qualifications, such as NVQs, are not meeting the learning needs of LSAs who work with pupils with complex learning disabilities (and TAs who have similar roles in mainstream schools) and that alternative approaches must be found for equipping these staff to carry out their work. A starting point would be for the DfE to reconsider its lack of support for the introduction of professional standards for LSAs (as part of a wider policy on those relating to teaching assistants in general). Additionally, the DfE should recognise that funding must be made available for the training and development of these paraeducators given the specialised nature of the support they provide, particularly when viewed in light of the mandatory requirements of teachers who work with this population of students. Whilst such sentiments may be met with resistance in light of the current austere financial climate, it is incumbent on the government to ensure the paraeducator workforce is of sufficient quality to deliver educational support that is of the quality the government requires.

It would also be pertinent for the government to appreciate the importance of investing in training of the right calibre for LSAs in the context of the wider fiscal challenges the country is experiencing. It is as a result of excellent educational provision that pupils with more complex learning difficulties develop communication and life skills that enable them to go on to live in assisted housing. Not only is this of fundamental importance for the quality of life of the individuals
and their families, but a reduction in intensive support means the financial cost to funders is greatly reduced.

9.5 Summary of my research contribution

In my ethnography, I explored the factors that influenced whether Learning Support Assistants are equipped to deliver specialised pedagogical provision. In doing so, I have added to the limited research on this important and yet inadequately understood group. Moreover, my research was carried out in the rarely-studied setting of a special school.

Although my research focused on one special school this research can inform mainstream contexts, and identify how the abilities of teaching assistants in different educational settings can be developed, because of my adoption of the WALF’s theoretical standpoint. Furthermore, by applying the WALF and to a lesser extent other learning theories, my thesis has utilised workplace learning theory to make an important intellectual contribution to the discussion about how high quality educational provision can be delivered. Given the increasing use of paraeducators in English schools to deliver sessions that were previously the remit of teachers, this is an important contribution to make. My thesis is also apposite, because the number of children in England with more complex learning difficulties is increasing and these individuals require specialist paraeducators to be appropriately equipped to meet their needs, whether they are being educated in special or mainstream schools.

My dissertation also contributes to policy and practice by suggesting the ways in which school leaders can approach the specific pressures they face in their endeavours to provide appropriate workplace learning opportunities for their LSAs. As a consequence, this significant group of the educational workforce can be better equipped for the job they are required to do.

One special school Headteacher stated recently that “great teaching assistants are the life blood of the school” (BBC Radio 4 Today programme, 14th September 2016), but during the discussion that followed there was the ever-present acknowledgement of the gap in relevant learning and development opportunities for this group of paraeducators. My research informs the limited literature on this
subject and contributes to the wider debate on this under researched and multifaceted area. This research undertaking was important because every child should be able to “maximise the educational opportunities” (Imray and Hinchcliffe, 2014, page xii) on offer; it is only by ensuring the quality of the educational workforce that this can be realised.
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APPENDIX A

Permission from Headteacher at Willowbank School

Confirmation of approval to undertake PhD research at the [name of school removed]

23rd October 2014

Hi Trudi
Thank you for your request to undertake research at [school] I am happy for you to go ahead and am sure your results will support us on our mission to improve outcomes for our young people.
Kind regards
[Name]

[Name]
Director of Education

[School contact information removed]
Potential participation in PhD research titled ‘What factors influence learning and development opportunities for Learning Support Assistants who support pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities and Severe Learning Disabilities?’

Thank you for your interest in this study, which I am carrying out for my PhD at Manchester University.

My research will explore the views of Headteachers, teachers and Learning Support Assistants about the learning and development opportunities on offer to LSAs.

If you would like to participate in this research you will be asked to share your views in a one to one interview where I will ask you about your views on the learning and development opportunities that are available to LSAs. When I talk about learning and development I’m referring to all types of learning provision, for example it might be one off training provided by staff at the school, or ongoing training at the school, or studying for a qualification at a college or university, or some other learning opportunity. You will also be asked some demographic questions, for example your age and how long you have done your present job.

The discussion will be audio recorded; this is required because I am unable to take detailed notes and also listen carefully to what you are saying. The audio recording will only be heard by me and I will delete it when the study has reported in accordance with University regulations. The interview should last no longer than one hour and will take place at your school at a time that is convenient for you and the school. You will not be paid for your participation, but you will have my sincere gratitude!

I will also be observing in classrooms and around school, so that I can understand what happens at school more clearly and observe whether the layout of the school and set-up of classrooms have an impact on how staff share ideas and information.
with each other. It is important to stress that I will **not** be observing LSAs’, therapists’ or teachers’ practice, my observations are solely interested in the workplace as a learning environment.

Thank you for taking time to read this letter, if you have any further questions or would like to participate, please contact me at:  
[Trudi.Martin@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:Trudi.Martin@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk)

Kind regards

Trudi Martin
APPENDIX C

Participant Information Sheet for interviewees (LSA and teacher)

What factors influence the learning environment for educators who support pupils with very complex learning needs at a special school?

You are being invited to participate in the above study, which is being carried out by Trudi Martin for her doctorate at Manchester University. This information sheet provides you with information about this study and what it will involve. Please take your time to read it and ask any questions you may have. It is important you understand what the study involves, and that you are happy with the information provided before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Who will conduct the research?
Trudi Martin, from Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL

Title of the research
What factors influence the learning environment for educators who support pupils with very complex learning needs at a special school?

What is the aim of the research?
The specialist knowledge and practice of LSAs, teachers and therapists who support pupils with very complex learning needs directly affects the quality of education these pupils receive and has an influence on their ability to acquire skills and make choices. In this research, I want to explore how the workplace learning environment helps the learning support team to support pupils with very complex learning disabilities. I will be interviewing staff at the school to gain their views on the learning environment at the school and the school’s approach to workforce learning and development.

I will also be observing in classrooms, so that I can understand what happens at school more clearly and observe whether the layout of the school and set-up of classrooms have an impact on how staff share ideas and information with each other. It is important to stress that the researcher will not be observing LSAs’, teachers’ or therapists’ practice, the researcher’s observations are solely interested in the workplace as a learning environment. For example, the amount and use of communal space in a classroom, and the extent to which individual learning spaces are used. I am also interested to see how school policies may affect the learning environment at the school.
I will also deliver a training course to teachers on classroom organisation, time management and staff deployment and evaluate whether the training was helpful.

The findings will be used to inform policy makers, Headteachers, educators, therapists and others about factors that help the learning and knowledge sharing of teachers, LSAs and therapists, so that this group of specialist educators can provide effective educational support to pupils with very complex learning needs.

**Why have I been chosen?**
You are a [Learning Support Assistant] [teacher] who supports pupils with very complex learning difficulties in a special school. Your experiences and opinions would be very helpful in identifying the type of learning environment a school can provide to help the learning opportunities on offer to LSAs and other members of the learning support team.

**What would I be asked to do if I took part?**
You would be interviewed by the researcher, Trudi Martin, and the interview would take place at school. The researcher is interested to hear about your views on the learning and development opportunities that are available, in particular, to LSAs at your school. ‘Learning and development’ means all types of learning opportunities. For example, it might be one off training provided by staff, or ongoing training at the school, studying for a qualification at a college or university, or some other learning opportunity provided by a company paid to do so either at school or off-site. If possible, the researcher would like to interview you at the start of her research early in 2015 and then towards the end of the school year in summer 2015.

The discussion will be audio recorded; this is because the researcher cannot take detailed notes and also listen carefully to what you are saying. The audio recording will only be heard by the researcher and will be deleted when the study has reported in accordance with University regulations. The discussion should last no longer than one hour.

You will also be asked to complete a short form that will collect demographic data, for example your qualifications, your age and how long you have done your present job.

**What happens to the data collected?**
The audio-recorded information from the interviews will be transcribed and analysed by the researcher to see what topics were raised during the interviews. Your name will not be used in the write up of this study, and the information you have given will be kept securely using encrypted documents, on a password protected computer and no one else will have access to it.
The researcher’s two supervisors at the University of Manchester will read the information that is written, but will not be told the names of people who took part.

Exceptions to anonymity
Names of participants will be anonymised, however if someone participating in this study reveals to the researcher that they have been harmed then the researcher has a duty to report this to an appropriate authority. This would be done with the full knowledge of the individual and with their agreement about who should be informed. The researcher also has a duty to report to an appropriate authority if the participant states that they have, or intend to, harm someone.

What happens if I do not want to take part, or having agreed to take part I change my mind?
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. No one will be asked to participate in this research against their will and no undue influence will be used to try and persuade you to take part. You can refuse to take part in the study, or decide to withdraw from the study at any time, without the need to provide a reason and this will not disadvantage you in any way. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

You will be asked to take part in a second interview during the course of this research; if you do not wish to participate in the second interview you can decline without giving a reason and without any detriment to yourself. If you agree to be interviewed for a second time, the researcher will discuss the research with you again and ask you to sign another consent form.

What is the duration of the research?
The data collection phase of this research is planned to begin in early 2015 and to be complete by autumn 2015, so you will be asked to be interviewed during this time.

The research will be completed by September 2016 and you will be provided with a summary of the research.

Who can I contact for further information?
Please contact either the researcher Trudi Martin by emailing: Trudi.Martin@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk, or her supervisor Professor Ruth Lupton, by emailing: Ruth.Lupton@manchester.ac.uk

Who do I contact if I am unhappy about the research?
If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with the researcher, please contact the Research Practice Governance Co-ordinator by either writing to ‘The Research Practice Governance Co-ordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester
M13 9PL, by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk, or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093
Consent Form

What factors influence the learning environment for educators who support pupils with very complex learning needs at a special school?

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and have had any questions answered satisfactorily
   Please initial here:

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason
   Please initial here:

3. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded
   Please initial here:

4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes
   Please initial here:

I agree to take part in the above project

---------------------------------- Name of participant

---------------------------------- Signature --------- Date

---------------------------------- Name of person taking consent

---------------------------------- Signature --------- Date
APPENDIX D

Participant Information Sheet for interviewees (therapist)

What factors influence the learning environment for educators who support pupils with very complex learning needs at a special school?

You are being invited to participate in the above study, which is being carried out by Trudi Martin for her doctorate at Manchester University. This information sheet provides you with information about this study and what it will involve. Please take your time to read it and ask any questions you may have. It is important you understand what the study involves, and that you are happy with the information provided before you decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Who will conduct the research?
Trudi Martin, from Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL

Title of the research
What factors influence the learning environment for educators who support pupils with very complex learning needs at a special school?

What is the aim of the research?
The specialist knowledge and practice of LSAs, teachers and therapists who support pupils with very complex learning needs directly affects the quality of education these pupils receive and has an influence on their ability to acquire skills and make choices. In this research, I want to explore how the workplace learning environment helps the learning support team to support pupils with very complex learning disabilities. I will be interviewing staff at the school to gain their views on the learning environment at the school and the school’s approach to workforce learning and development.

I will also be observing in classrooms, so that I can understand what happens at school more clearly and observe whether the layout of the school and set-up of classrooms have an impact on how staff share ideas and information with each other. It is important to stress that the researcher will not be observing LSAs’, teachers’ or therapists’ practice, the researcher’s observations are solely interested in the workplace as a learning environment. For example, the amount and use of communal space in a classroom, and the extent to which individual learning spaces are used. I am also interested to see how school policies may affect the learning environment at the school.
I will also deliver a training course to teachers on classroom organisation, time management and staff deployment and evaluate whether the training was helpful.

The findings will be used to inform policy makers, Headteachers, educators, therapists and others about factors that help the learning and knowledge sharing of teachers, LSAs and therapists, so that this group of specialist educators can provide effective educational support to pupils with very complex learning needs.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You are a therapist who supports pupils with very complex learning difficulties in a special school. Your experiences and opinions would be very helpful in identifying the type of learning environment a school can provide to help the learning opportunities on offer to LSAs and other members of the learning support team.

**What would I be asked to do if I took part?**

You would be interviewed by the researcher, Trudi Martin, and the interview would take place at school. The researcher is interested to hear about your views on the learning and development opportunities that are available, in particular, to LSAs at your school. ‘Learning and development’ means all types of learning opportunities. For example, it might be one off training provided by staff, or ongoing training at the school, studying for a qualification at a college or university, or some other learning opportunity provided by a company paid to do so either at school or off-site.

The discussion will be audio recorded; this is because the researcher cannot take detailed notes and also listen carefully to what you are saying. The audio recording will only be heard by the researcher and will be deleted when the study has reported in accordance with University regulations. The discussion should last no longer than one hour.

You will also be asked to complete a short form that will collect demographic data, for example your qualifications, your age and how long you have done your present job.

**What happens to the data collected?**

The audio-recorded information from the interviews will be transcribed and analysed by the researcher to see what topics were raised during the interviews. Your name will not be used in the write up of this study, and the information you have given will be kept securely using encrypted documents, on a password protected computer and no one else will have access to it.

The researcher’s two supervisors at the University of Manchester will read the information that is written, but will not be told the names of people who took part.
Exceptions to anonymity
Names of participants will be anonymised, however if someone participating in this study reveals to the researcher that they have been harmed then the researcher has a duty to report this to an appropriate authority. This would be done with the full knowledge of the individual and with their agreement about who should be informed. The researcher also has a duty to report to an appropriate authority if the participant states that they have, or intend to, harm someone.

What happens if I do not want to take part, or having agreed to take part I change my mind?
Participation in this study is completely voluntary. No one will be asked to participate in this research against their will and no undue influence will be used to try and persuade you to take part. You can refuse to take part in the study, or decide to withdraw from the study at any time, without the need to provide a reason and this will not disadvantage you in any way. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the duration of the research?
The data collection phase of this research is planned to begin in early 2015 and to be complete by autumn 2015, so you will be asked to be interviewed during this time.

The research will be completed by September 2016 and you will be provided with a summary of the research.

Who can I contact for further information?
Please contact either the researcher Trudi Martin by emailing: Trudi.Martin@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk, or her supervisor Professor Ruth Lupton, by emailing: Ruth.Lupton@manchester.ac.uk

Who do I contact if I am unhappy about the research?
If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with the researcher, please contact the Research Practice Governance Co-ordinator by either writing to ‘The Research Practice Governance Co-ordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk, or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093
Consent Form

What factors influence the learning environment for educators who support pupils with very complex learning needs at a special school?

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and have had any questions answered satisfactorily
   Please initial here:

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any time without giving a reason
   Please initial here:

3. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded
   Please initial here:

4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes
   Please initial here:

I agree to take part in the above project

--------------------------------------    Name of participant

--------------------------------------    Signature    ------- Date

--------------------------------------    Name of person taking consent

--------------------------------------    Signature    ------- Date
APPENDIX E

Information and consent for staff working in classrooms (non-interview)

What factors influence the learning and development opportunities for Learning Support Assistants who support pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities and Severe Learning Disabilities?

This form provides you with information about some research, which is being carried out by Trudi Martin for her doctorate at Manchester University.

Who will conduct the research?

Trudi Martin, from Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL

Title of the Research

What factors influence the learning and development opportunities for Learning Support Assistants who support pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities and Severe Learning Disabilities?

What is the research studying?

To find out the views of Headteachers, teachers and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) about the learning and development opportunities on offer to LSAs, and the things they take into consideration when learning and development events are being planned and delivered. The researcher hopes the findings from this research will inform policy makers and educators of factors that influence the effective provision of learning and development strategies in special schools; this is important because the provision of learning and development opportunities for LSAs shapes the quality of education that pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities and Severe Learning Disabilities receive.

I will also be observing in classrooms and around school, so that I can understand what happens at school more clearly and observe whether the layout of the school and set-up of classrooms have an impact on how staff share ideas and information with each other. It is important to stress that the researcher will not be observing LSAs’, teachers’ or therapists’ practice, the researcher’s observations are solely interested in the workplace as a learning environment. For example, the amount and use of communal space in a classroom and the extent to which individual learning spaces are used. I am also interested to see how policies may affect the learning environment at the school.

The findings will be used to inform policy makers, Headteachers, educators and others about factors that help the learning and knowledge sharing of teachers, LSAs and therapists, so that this group of specialist educators can provide effective educational support to pupils with very complex learning needs.
Why am I being asked to sign a consent form?

You are being asked to sign a consent form because the researcher will be making observational notes in your classroom, or during a meeting you are attending. With your permission, the researcher will also record the meeting.

What happens to the observational data collected?

The observations noted by the researcher will be written up and analysed by the researcher to identify themes, which have emerged from these observations. Individual classes and members of staff will not be identified in any part of the research.

The researcher’s two supervisors at the University of Manchester will read the information that is written, but will not be told the names of people who took part.

Exceptions to anonymity

Names of participants will be anonymised, however, if someone participating in this study reveals to the researcher that they have been harmed then the researcher has a duty to report this to an appropriate authority. This would be done with the full knowledge of the individual and with their agreement about who should be informed. The researcher also has a duty to report to an appropriate authority if the participant states they have, or intend to, harm someone.

What happens if I do not want the researcher to make observational notes while I am in the classroom?

If you do not want the researcher to make observations whilst you are working in the classroom she will ensure she is not present at those times.

What is the duration of the research?

The data collection phase of this research is planned to begin in early 2015 and to be complete by autumn 2015.

The research will be completed by September 2016 and a study report will be made available to staff at that time.

Who can I contact for further information?

Please contact either the researcher Trudi Martin by emailing: Trudi.Martin@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk, or her supervisor Ruth Lupton, by emailing: Ruth.Lipton@manchester.ac.uk
Who do I contact if I am unhappy about the research?

If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with the researcher, please contact the Research Practice Governance Co-ordinator by either writing to ‘The Research Practice Governance Co-ordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk, or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093
Consent Form

What factors influence the learning and development opportunities for Learning Support Assistants who support pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities and Severe Learning Disabilities?

If you are happy with the information you have been given, including the answers to any questions you may have had, please complete and sign the consent form below.

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and have had any questions answered satisfactorily.

   Please initial here:

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can ask the researcher to stop making observations where I am working at any time and without giving a reason and this will not disadvantage me in any way.

   Please initial here:

I agree to take part in the above project

------------------------------------------ Name of participant

------------------------------------------ Signature  ---------------- Date

------------------------------------------ Name of person taking consent

------------------------------------------ Signature  ---------------- Date

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APPENDIX F

Demographic details (LSA)

Date:

Interviewee ID:

Age:

Gender:

How many years have you worked as an LSA?

How long have you worked at Willowbank?

Have you previously worked at a school that supports pupils with very complex needs? Was this as an LSA or another role?

Prior to working at this school what experience did you have supporting pupils with special educational needs? Please state if this was at a special or mainstream school

Do you have any qualifications that relate to your role?

Are you currently studying for a qualification? Please state which qualification
APPENDIX G

Demographic details (teacher)

Date:

Interviewee ID:

Age:

Gender:

How many years have you worked as a teacher?

Have you previously worked at a school that supports pupils with very complex needs? Was this in a teaching role, or have you supported pupils in another role (e.g. LSA)?

Prior to working at this school what experience did you have supporting pupils with special educational needs? Please state whether this was at a special school or mainstream school

Do you have any postgraduate SEN qualifications (e.g. supporting pupils with MSI, Autism or hearing impairment?) Please state which qualification/s

Are you currently studying for a postgraduate qualification? Please state which qualification
APPENDIX H

LSA interview prompt questions

I am interested in hearing your views on the learning environment at the school. When I refer to the “learning environment” this includes the types of formal courses open to staff (such as vocational qualifications, university courses), training that occurs in school (e.g. during INSET days or training by teachers/LSAs/therapists) and also how knowledge is shared informally amongst colleagues. I am particularly interested in whether the school’s learning environment helps you, as an LSA, to support the education of students effectively.

1. What are your views on this school’s approach to training and developing its staff?
2. Who do you think has the main responsibility for training LSAs?
   - How well do you think they able to provide training? (E.g. teachers, therapists, other LSAs)
3. What opportunities are there for staff to share training at school?
4. Can you tell me about any learning and development opportunities that are open to LSAs outside the school?
   - Depending on answer explore whether there are opportunities for going to other schools to do training, or for LSAs to provide training to other schools
5. When you are doing external courses how much time do you have away from your class?
   - Explore if this includes study leave or time to attend course only
6. When you have attended training how do you make sure that your learning is put into practice?
7. What about other staff who have attended training? How do you know what they have learnt has improved their practice? (Explore here if staff actually manage to witness other staff with students i.e. explore geographical/physical set up of school and extent of isolation of sessions)
8. How do staff share their knowledge across the school?
   - Is knowledge shared broadly? (Explore if shared with teachers, LSAs, therapists)
   - Do you share ideas with parents?
9. What are the benefits of providing learning and development opportunities to LSAs?
10. Do you have any other thoughts on how the opportunities for your training could be improved at the school?
APPENDIX I

Teacher interview prompts (including questions relating to training session)

As you know I will be taking some training on managing resources and time. To help me plan this effectively, I would be interested in hearing about how you currently plan your time and that of the LSAs in your class.

11. What is the level of support required by pupils in your class (e.g. 1:1, 2:1)? (Also explore if pupils could have lower staff ratio than 1:1 and reasons behind response)

12. Can you describe how you plan the workload for your class team for each day, each week, half term and term?

13. Describe the things you consider when planning the support that you and your staff are going to provide

14. How do you allocate LSAs to pupils? Follow up as necessary, whether the same LSA works with the same pupil, or whether LSAs work with different pupils

15. Does the location of each pupil’s lesson influence your planning? (E.g. if pupil is 1:1 in sensory room; if pupils can be taught in small groups)

16. How much time do you plan into your day for observing and training the LSAs in your class?

17. How do you ensure breaks and lunchtimes are covered?

18. What are the things that help and hinder you in your planning?

19. Do you involve/discuss your planning with anyone else?

20. Is there anything else you would like to mention, which has an impact on how you are able to manage the work of your class team?

Could we now move on to discuss what the learning environment is like for staff at the school? When I refer to the “learning environment” this includes the types of formal courses open to staff (such as vocational qualifications, university courses), training that occurs in school (e.g. during INSET days or training by teachers/LSAs/therapists) and also how knowledge is shared informally amongst colleagues. I am particularly interested in whether the school’s learning environment helps LSAs to support the education of students effectively.

21. Can you tell me the school’s approach to training and developing its staff?

22. Can you tell me who you believe has the main responsibility for training LSAs?
   - How well do you think they (e.g. teachers, therapists, other LSAs) are equipped to provide training?

23. What forums exist for training within the school?
   - What are the benefits for training provided by these forums? (Focus question in on LSAs, as necessary)
   - Are there limitations in providing training in this way?

24. Are you aware of the learning and development opportunities open to LSAs outside the school?
- Depending on answer explore whether there are opportunities for going to other schools to do training, or for LSAs to provide training to other schools

25. When LSAs are doing external courses how much time do they have away from their classes?
   - Explore if this includes study leave or time to attend course only

26. When staff have attended training how do you know if their learning has improved their practice?
   - How does the school ensure their learning is consolidated?

27. How do staff share their knowledge across the school?
   - Is knowledge shared broadly? (Explore if shared with teachers, LSAs, therapists)
   - Do LSAs share ideas with parents?

28. What are the benefits of providing learning and development opportunities to LSAs?

29. Do you have any other thoughts on how the opportunities for training could be improved at the school?
APPENDIX J

Semi structured interview prompts for the Head teacher and Deputy

I am interested in exploring the learning environment at the school. When I refer to the “learning environment” this includes the types of formal courses open to staff (such as vocational qualifications, university courses), training that occurs in school (e.g. during INSET days or training by teachers/LSAs/therapists) and also how knowledge is shared informally amongst colleagues. I am particularly interested in studying how the school’s learning environment helps LSAs to support the education of students effectively.

1. Can you tell me the current strategy you have at this school for the training and development of staff?
   - Some senior leaders at schools have told me that they have to prioritise their training budgets for certain groups of staff (e.g. teachers). Is this something you have to consider?
2. When a new LSA joins the school, what is the process for identifying their training needs?
3. Can you tell me who you believe has the main responsibility for training LSAs?
   - How well do you think they (e.g. teachers, therapists, other LSAs) are equipped to provide training?
4. What forums exist for training within the school?
   - What are the benefits for training provided by these forums? (Focus question in on LSAs, as necessary)
   - Are there limitations in providing training in this way?
   - Would you like to be able to offer any additional training provision for your staff, but are unable to do so? (Focus question in on LSAs, as necessary; explore reasons why additional training can’t be offered, if necessary)
5. What learning and development opportunities are open to LSAs outside the school?
   - Depending on answer explore whether there are opportunities for going to other schools to do training, or for LSAs to provide training to other schools
6. When LSAs are doing external courses how much time do they have away from their classes?
   - Explore if this includes study leave or time to attend course only
7. When staff have attended training how do you know if their learning has improved their practice?
   - How does the school ensure their learning is consolidated?
8. How do staff share their knowledge across the school?
   - Is knowledge shared broadly? (Explore if shared with teachers, LSAs,
therapists)
- Do LSAs share ideas with parents?
9. What are the benefits of providing learning and development opportunities to LSAs?
10. Do you have any other thoughts on how the opportunities for training could be improved at the school?