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A critical examination of the professional status of school learning support staff in England

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ABSTRACT

As educational institutions worldwide strive to create inclusive and equitable learning environments, the role of learning support staff has gained increasing prominence. This article delves into the evolving professional status of learning support staff within the context of English schools from the mid-twentieth century to the present. By examining different definitions of professionalism, this article addresses whether learning support staff can be understood to fit into the category of professionals. The article adopts a systematic approach, synthesising findings from a wide range of literature encompassing education policy, academic research into support staff and professional identity theories. Through a critical examination of theories of professionalism, empirical research, and conceptual discussions, the review uncovers the intricate interplay between personal values, organisational culture, and societal perceptions that shape the professional status of support staff. The article underscores the organisational tensions impacting on perceptions of professional status, emphasising the themes of professional autonomy, hierarchical command structures and the downplaying of the importance of emotional labour. The article concludes by identifying the need for more research into the personal narratives of support staff.

Learning support staff: an introduction

Globally, 'teacher aides' are defined by the International Standard Classification for Education as "non-professional personnel who support teachers in providing instruction for students" (UNESCO, 2011). Under the Education Specified Work Regulations for England (Legislation.gov.uk, 2012), learning support personnel are defined as classroom-based staff in roles other than teachers, students and instructors.

The number of learning support staff (LSS) employed in inclusive settings in England has increased exponentially since the early 2000s (DfE, 2019). The number of full-time LSS across all state funded English schools was recorded as 281,094 accounting for over a quarter of the full-time school workforce and representing a steady increase in annual recruitment (GOV.UK, 2022). The growth in LSS numbers mirrors an international trend towards increasing numbers employed in paraprofessional roles (Webster & Boer, 2019).

According to 2019 workforce statistics, 90.7% of LSS in the UK were female, compared to 9.3% male, working an average of twenty-nine hours a week, and earning an average annual salary of £15,643 (Careersmart, 2019). A more recent estimate suggests a current annual salary of approximately £13,000, considering pro rata pay (Twinkl, 2021). There are no official statistics available for determining the average LSS age. However, research carried out in 2021 to investigate the impact of working conditions on LSS provides demographic

information for a sample of 3,242 LSS across the UK, revealing that the mean average age across respondents was 47.71 years old. with the mean average in secondary school respondents recorded as 48.85 years old (Ravalier et al., 2021). Clarke & Visser (2021) draw upon a number of studies to produce a clearer profile of the average LSS member working in England, revealing that they tend to be aged between forty-one and fifty, possess a lower level of formal education than teachers, whilst research conducted by Watson et al. (2013) suggested that LSS participants often have family responsibilities that take priority over work.

Employment figures for LSS have continued to follow similar patterns to those established during New Labour's tenure (1997-2010), with numbers trebling since the year 2000 and the majority of those employed working in the primary sector, compared to around 18% employed in the secondary sector (Education Policy Institute, 2020). The EPI report demonstrates a positive correlation between the number of LSS employed by individual schools and the number of pupils regarded as 'disadvantaged' or 'vulnerable' who are attending that school. Ofsted categorises looked-after pupils, pupils with some SEND, and pupils who are eligible for free school meals as disadvantaged and vulnerable, (Ofsted 2021).

Historical context:

Ancillaries to a quarter of the school workforce: A historical perspective

Ancillary classroom support has existed in various forms in England since at least the Victorian era where senior pupils were enlisted as 'pupil teachers' and given responsibility for assisting class teachers in carrying out general duties (Watkinson, 2008). Known sometimes as welfare assistants or ancillary 'helps', support staff provided general assistance, usually through cleaning and organising the classroom (Watkinson, 2003).

Successive governments have attempted to improve and modernise English state schools through remodelling the roles, responsibilities and working practices of school employees (Bignold & Babera, 2011). To examine the broader concept of LSS professional identity, it is necessary to discuss the role from its earliest inception in English education policy and track subsequent historical developments. Local as well as global policy factors have impacted on the development of non-teaching roles in schools (Edmond & Price, 2009).

The most established interpretation of the LSS role involves supporting learners with SEND. Deploying LSS to specifically support pupils with SEND stemmed from a shift in English education policy away from the psycho-medical model of support towards an inclusive ideology (Troeva, 2015). The psycho-medical model of disability operates on the principle that those with physical or learning disabilities are 'deficient' and require either institutionalisation or some form of treatment to facilitate integration into society. This conceptualisation of impairment represented traditional Western attitudes towards disability and influenced education policy up to the 1970s (Hodkinson, 2019).

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, segregated settings in England struggled to deliver an adequate standard of education for children with physical and learning disabilities, largely due to unsuitable facilities and an overreliance on untrained teaching staff (Philip, 2021). The growth of parent-advocacy groups as well as advances in medical technology throughout this period led some to call for a critical re-evaluation of the efficacy of special schools (Armstrong, 2007). Research projects such as the Brooklands Experiment investigated the environmental impact on children with learning needs and led to an increased awareness of the positive impacts of socialisation and play (Philip, 2021). General perceptions and attitudes towards physical disability were also influenced by Civil Rights movements taking place in the United States between the 1960s and the 1970s, where disability advocates called for the lifting of societal barriers to participation (Borstelmann, 2020). These factors combined helped to instigate a paradigm shift from medicalisation towards a rights-based model of disability in British policy, including through education reform (Lindsay et al., 2020).

The 1981 Education Act and the 1988 Education Reform Act: Increasing the need for support staff in schools

The 1981 Education Act provided clear guidelines on special needs legislation regarding assessment and integration of children with special educational needs. Under the definitions of the Warnock Report, approximately twenty percent of children were estimated to require some form of additional need at some point during their school careers (Runswick-Cole & Hodge, 2009).

Despite lacking in some areas, the 1981 Act did provide some funding to allow schools to recruit LSS to support the influx of pupils transitioning from specialist settings into mainstream schools (Bach et al., 2006). It is difficult to provide recruitment numbers for LSS during the 1980s. This is partially due to confusion surrounding distinctions between full and part-time staff as well as the presence of voluntary helpers (Watkinson, 2003). Voluntary helpers were often parents drawn from the school community to provide classroom teachers with additional help, for those pupils identified as requiring additional support across nursery, primary and secondary settings (Webster et al., 2013).

An increased focus on marketisation and standards underpinned the next major Conservative education reform; the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA). This act allowed for schools to opt out of LA control and function as grant-maintained schools instead utilising central government funding to control their own budgets (Whitty, 2008). Implementation of the ERA introduced greater parental choice which in turn resulted in direct pressures on schools to compete with one another (Lindsay et al., 2020). Although the ERA did not explicitly address learning support, the establishment of league tables, a standardised national curriculum and Ofsted forced schools to carefully consider how they used their budgets and structured staffing to meet new targets (Whitty, 2008). Prior to implementation of the national curriculum, LSS had not been regarded as providing academic support, they were instead interpreted by some as a voluntary 'mum's army' of paint-pot washers and carers (Bach et al., 2006). Implementation of the ERA meant that schools in England had to focus on maintaining their statuses in a competitive market through re-evaluation of job roles and responsibilities. Clayton (1993) commented that the years following the ERA witnessed a subtle change in how LSS roles were understood, from 'teaching assistant' to 'assistant teachers'. Under New Labour, the vision of an efficient and globally competitive education system would be further consolidated (Lindsay et al., 2020) setting the stage for the next chapter of paraprofessional development.

New Labour and workforce remodelling: The rise of the paraprofessional

New Labour's 1997 education manifesto promised to prioritise increased spending on education to tackle social inequality and raise the standards of British education within a global knowledge economy (Heath et al., 2013). The policies introduced by New Labour represented the next major phase of education reform in England.

The turn of the century witnessed an interest in the training and development of LSS in England. A guide for supporting and working with teaching assistants (DfES, 2000), was intended to recognise the contribution of TAs, whilst the 2002 Education Act made specific reference to LSS, stating that they made substantial contributions to teaching. During this period, the number of LSS in schools began to increase to the point where they represented a substantial body of school employees. Between 1992 and 2005, the number of LSS increased by 110%, consequently, by 2005 LSS represented approximately twenty-five per cent of the school workforce (Wilson & Bedford, 2008), with the majority employed within the primary sector (Hammersley-Fletcher & Lowe, 2011):

> The ratio of assistants to teachers continues to improve as policy continues to foreground the importance of assistants. Between 1999 and 2002, the government made £350 million available through LEAs to recruit an additional 20,000 full-time equivalent teaching assistants for both primary and secondary schools (Vincett et al., 2005, p.3).

Watkinson (2008) identified a five-pronged strategy implemented by New Labour between 1997 and 2000 designed to boost LSS recruitment figures. This strategy included providing local authorities with additional recruitment funds specifically for learning support staff and establishing a career ladder for LSS involving the opportunity to earn nationally recognised qualifications:

> The role of teaching assistants is vital in supporting children's individual needs, in helping teachers use and interpret data, in managing behaviour, and in giving teachers time to plan and prepare lessons. The reshaping of the workforce in schools also means there are more and better career pathways for those who begin working with children and decide they would like to become

> teaching assistants and then teachers (DfES, 2004, p.41 in Bach et al., 2006, p.5).

Progression routes

As the numbers of LSS in England increased, new perceptions of the LSS role began to generate attention from education policy reformers (Groom, 2006). Section D of the NWFA 2003) cited the changing nature of the LSS role as justification for a proposal to enhance the professional duties of support staff:

> Support staff working alongside teachers have *already* contributed to significant improvements in the quality of teaching and learning, including as part of the literacy and numeracy strategies, in early years and in SEN. Over the coming years, we shall see new developments, pushing back the boundaries of what assistants can do in classrooms (NWFA, 2003, p.12).

The establishment of HLTA training schemes was rationalised by the DfES as an opportunity for LSS to showcase their "underutilised skills and talents" (Burgess & Shelton Mayes, 2009, p.3). However, Howes (2003) interpreted proposals to offer LSS the opportunity to pursue HLTA status as evidence of policy enactors failing to recognise the positive contributions made by LSS and instead viewing them as existing outside of school-based professional discourse. The NWFA proposals stipulated that HLTAs were not intended to replace teachers but to carry out their duties "within a regulated system of supervision and leadership operated by the pupils' classroom/subject teacher" (NWFA, 2003, p.13).

The HLTA progression route bore some similarities to initial teacher training courses and was therefore viewed as an attempt to replicate professional structures across teachers and LSS without blurring the two groups. However, standard thirty-one, "advance learning when working with whole classes without the presence of the assigned teacher" (HLTA.org, 2020) has been viewed as potentially blurring the lines between LSS and teacher roles, leading to UNISON's issuing of cover supervision guidance stating that HLTAs "could be asked to provide cover as *a small part of their role* but it is not an appropriate use of their skills, knowledge and expertise" (UNISON, 2018).

Findings from the Deployment and Impact of Support Staff report (2012)

Austerity measures undertaken by the Coalition government led to significant cuts to the education budget (IFS, 2015). During this period, the professional development of LSS received scant attention (Brown & Devecchi, 2013). Scrutiny was instead given to findings from the 2009 Deployment and Impact of Support Staff in Schools (DISS) project that suggested a correlation between LSS support and pupil under-achievement (Blatchford et al., 2009). Whilst the NWFA was criticised for basing workforce reforms on unsubstantiated and general claims about the impact of LSS. Webster et al. (2016) argued that prior to the DISS project, accounts of LSS impact were limited to small-scale case studies which tended to present TA presence as impacting positively on pupils without investigating more complex factors such as training and whole-school ethos.

The DISS project was cited in the Coalition's 2011 SEND consultation paper as confirmation of the potential negative impacts of deploying LSS as one-to-one pupil support (DfE, 2011). Evidence of the DISS project's influence on policy-led perceptions of LSS can also be seen from the brief mention of their in role the SEND CoP (2015) as entirely managed by classroom teachers. The DISS report remains the most extensive and influential example of research into the deployment of LSS and it has "served to problematise" (Lewis, 2023, p.2) the perception of LSS by presenting them both as hindrances to pupil progress and as adults who are unable to independently demonstrate professional efficacy without input from class teachers.

Examining the impact of the increase of classroom support staff since the Salamanca declaration, Fritzsche & Kopfer (2022) summarise a range of international perspectives to conclude:

> (Para-)professional assistance in inclusive school and instructional settings is characterised by relatively undefined roles and activities, precarious employment relationships, low levels of qualifications and professionalisation, and ambiguities between

closeness and distance, emancipation and dependence (Fritzsche & Kopfer, 2022, p.975).

Professionalism and professional identities

Defining 'professionalism' through characteristics

Professionalism can be seen as an "emotionally loaded" concept that divides workers into those who are classed as professional and those who do not meet the criteria (Gillespie, 1981, p.370). Definitions of professionalism has come under scrutiny since the mid-twentieth century to present day. In *Men and Their Work*, Hughes (1958) argued for a distinction between professions and occupations based upon the degree of trust society was prepared to invest in those deemed to possess specialist problem-solving knowledge. This definition appears straightforward at first. Law and medicine can be seen to represent clear examples of professions founded upon trust and specialist knowledge, However, it is possible to argue that *all* roles require a degree of trust in the expertise of the individual carrying them out, whether that be a call-centre operative or a plumber. If this is the case, then most if not all occupations could surely lay claim to professional status.

Attempts have been made to establish criteria for judging whether a role can legitimately be categorised as a profession. Rich (1984) proposed that there existed a standard for determining professional status resting on the assumption that professions were essentially intellectual, public-serving and fulfilled social ideals (Robertson, 1986). Professions could be characterised as:

- Requiring a high degree of general and systematised knowledge,
- Requiring a long period of specialised intellectual training,
- Providing a unique social service,
- Controlling its standards of inclusion and exclusion
- Developing and enforcing a professional code of ethics, and
- Granting practitioners a wide range of autonomy.

(Paraphrased from Rich, 1984, pp.8-11).

Furthermore, professions can be viewed as distinct from other occupations in that possessing a high degree of knowledge and offering unique social services results in professionals receiving financial rewards and privileged social status (Pratte & Rury, 1991). Adding intellectualism, autonomy, status, and financial reward to an understanding of professionalism, excludes a number of roles from the category of profession. The previous examples of call-centre operative and plumber may be regarded as failing to meet at least one of these criteria. Variation in personal interpretation may influence what is considered to constitute a high degree of knowledge or a unique social service.

Constructing a professional identity

Slay & Smith (2011) situated professional identity as embedded within personal identity, consequently, being part of an organisation influences not only how individuals perceive themselves, but also how other members of the organisation regard each other. The way in which an individual forms a professional identity is negotiated by a continuous processes of social construction, such as networking (Kasperiuniene & Zydziunaite, 2019). Professional identity is defined as not simply the persona that an individual presents in an organisation but rather the process of adapting internal values, motives, and beliefs into an ascribed role (Ibarra, 1999). Day and Kington (2008) posit a distinction between professional identity and role, suggesting that professional identity is the mechanism through which individuals navigate the demands of institutional roles, suggesting that it is not the roles themselves that constitute professional identity but rather how the individual performs them. Drawing upon structuration theory (Giddens, 1991), professional identity has been described as "reflexively organised and temporally informed narratives" (Clarke et al., 2009). Personal narrative is also described as a fundamental expression of professional identity, representing the speaker's situated consciousness and world-view, (Solari & Ortega, 2020), allowing for researchers to examine and compare the accounts of professional identity offered by different individuals ostensibly performing the same role.

The process of professional identity construction can be hindered when members of an organisation are presumed to be inferior, resulting in the creation of what Goffman (1963) termed 'spoiled' or 'stigmatised' identities. Those with stigmatised identities may perceive themselves to be disqualified from being fully accepted by a group. It is possible, however, for such individuals to cultivate positive conceptions of

themselves to maintain self-esteem when reflecting on their professional identity (Toyoki & Brown, 2014).

Do learning support staff 'count as professionals'?

Professionalism: Financial reward

UK-based news media outlets differ in their estimations of the average LSS salaries. For example, The Telegraph stated the following:

> On average, full-time TAs can expect up to £25,000, after gaining a higher-level teaching assistant (HLTA) qualification, which increases the level of responsibility, including teaching classes unsupervised. But for Level 1 and Level 2 teaching assistants – the vast majority – the annual salary is set between £17,000 and £20,000 (Fawehinmi, 2022).

Two weeks later, The Guardian reported on the challenges faced by senior leaders in recruiting and retaining LSS:

> "I have just posted the ad on social media again, alongside an ad for the local Aldi which pays £11.40 an hour. Our position pays £10 an hour. So they will get more working in a supermarket … one good candidate pulled out recently when she realised that she would be "worse off working at the school than on benefits" (Fazackerley, 2022).

Whilst some LAs may utilise school support staff pay scales, there does not exist a nationally agreed pay scale (NEU, 2022). Pro-rata pay, and considerable variety in contracts, means that it is difficult to estimate the average LSS annual salary (TES, 2019). According to data gathered by Payscale, full-time LSS earn on an average a base salary of £14,163 per annum (Payscale, 2022). After deductions, the average full-time salary is quoted as approximately £13,000 per annum (Twinkl, 2021). LSS are considered to be employed full-time if they work from Monday to Friday every week during term time throughout the school year.

Findings from the DISS report indicated that one-to-one LSS-led support hindered the progress of less able pupils, fuelling arguments that LSS did not represent value for money. Roffey-Barentsen & Watt (2014) counter this suggestion by instead suggesting that LSS are undervalued for the money that they represent. Indeed, a recent online petition has led to a House of Commons debate on LSS pay, highlighting high workloads and responsibility levels as rationale for increased pay (Parliament.UK, 2023). The government responded by citing yearly increases in LSS pay from 2017, as well as reiterating a reluctance to interfere in schools' expenditure policies.

> The government's education reforms gave schools freedom to make their own decisions about budgets. For most staff, including teaching assistants, schools have the freedom to recruit according to their own circumstances and set pay and conditions. All schools have different characteristics and should have the freedom to make decisions (Parliament.UK, 2023).

Evidence suggests that earning a higher income influences how individuals rate their levels of positive self-regard emotions such as pride, confidence, and self-control, (Tong et al., 2022). The question of whether higher incomes render individuals happier or whether those who possess greater levels of positive self-regard are more likely to attain high incomes is one that has proven difficult to answer (De Neve & Oswald, 2012). However, regardless of causality factors, higher incomes lead to both feelings of contentment on a moment-by-moment basis and overall life satisfaction (Killingsworth, 2021). With few progression routes and no centralised pay-scale, LSS roles may be seen as examples of low-paid "sticky floor" work (Rainbird, 2007). This kind of work is typically undertaken by women with caring duties and may have detrimental effects on future career prospects echoing Houston's (1990) concern over women with caring responsibilities facing greater levels of exploitation. "Sticky floors", caring responsibilities and lack of transparent career progression routes are cited in a Government Equalities Office report into workplace progression for women (Jones, 2019). Given that the average LSS salary is estimated at approximately £13,000 per annum, it would appear at least at initial glance that there is no financial reward for those employed in this role.

Professionalism as specialised knowledge

Idealistic conceptions of professionalism rest on the belief that specialist knowledge is gained through formal learning (Friedson, 2001 in Evetts, 2013, p.785). Evetts (2013) developed this interpretation by proposing that the ability to demonstrate discretion and competent decision-making in real-life situations may also be regarded as a form of professionalism. This interpretation of professionalism was explored by Lipsky (2010) through research into what he termed 'street-level bureaucracy'. Lipsky's research involved examining the day-to-day decision making enacted by a range of front-line public sector workers, whom he characterised as responsible for making policy decisions which are "immediate and personal" (Lipsky, 2010, p.8), whilst also operating at a distance from the centre of authority.

Prospective LSS are advised that to apply directly to schools, they will usually require at least five GCSEs graded nine to four (equivalent to A* to C) including English and Maths (NCS, 2022), although different schools set their own qualification criteria and may prioritise applicants with stronger qualifications. LSS are not monitored by a centralised professional standards authority, unlike teaching colleagues who possess graduate status and who are required to demonstrate continuing professional development across a range of standards (DfE, 2012). This disparity in minimum levels of qualification serves to frame teachers as 'professionals' whilst LSS are merely professionally competent (Edmond & Hayler, 2013). Graves (2013) also made this observation when comparing 'common sense' competency-based HLTA standards against professional teacher standards. Burgess and Shelton Mayes (2009) interpreted New Labour's introduction of HLTA accreditation as an attempt establish some parity between the status of teachers and LSS through providing the latter with the opportunity to meet professional standards. However, gaining HLTA accreditation involves showcasing skills and knowledge gained in the role of LSS which serves to frame HLTA accreditation as status rather than qualification (Edmond & Price, 2009).

Attempts had been made during the first years of the twentieth century to provide training and establish professional standards for LSS. However, there are currently no definitive professional standards for LSS working in England. A document entitled *Professional Standards for Teaching Assistants* (Unison et al., 2016) was intended to officially define the role and purpose of support staff in the same way that teachers' professional standards are identified but was ultimately rejected by the DfE. Basford et al., (2017) argue that under the Coalition and the subsequent Conservative government, removal of funding from local authorities left many schools responsible for the of remodelling their own workforces, leading to ambiguity over discrepancies in training for support staff. Lack of investment in LSS training and development was compounded by research across a range of primary schools that suggested LSS training had no measurable impact on improving learner outcomes (Blatchford et al., 2007).

Despite inconsistencies in school-led training and development, there are official training routes available for LSS. Further education courses include Level Two and Three Certificates in Supporting Teaching and Learning and LSS advanced apprenticeships. A number of providers in England also offer foundation degrees in teaching and learning, equivalent to A-Level qualifications. Qualifications such as these may be viewed as an attempt to offer at least a veneer of professional status to the LSS role in line with the concept of professionalism as being based upon specialised knowledge acquired through institutional learning (Rich, 1984).

Whilst it is difficult to identify a definitive body of standardised professional knowledge for LSS, it is possible to argue that LSS demonstrate an example of street-level bureaucracy appropriate for meeting the needs of pupils with SEND. When asked directly, LSS may indicate a lack of confidence in the value of their qualifications (McConkey & Abbott, 2011; Cockroft & Atkinson, 2015). However, Watkinson (2003) suggested that whilst LSS may not possess knowledge of specific learning theories, their proximity to pupils allows them great insight into how best to support individual learners. LSS are capable of judging situations quickly and multitasking (Watkinson, 2003) and can act as intermediaries between individual pupils and teachers (Farrell et al., 1999). In some instances where LSS were assigned to a single class, teachers reported concerns over LSS developing greater knowledge of pupils with SEND than the class teacher (Wilson & Bedford, 2008). Alternatively, LSS may feel that their ability to navigate different scenarios is impaired by schools applying peripatetic deployment models (Clarke & Visser, 2019) due to a lack of opportunities to build familiarity with

pupils and colleagues. Griffin & Blatchford (2021) draw upon Whitchurch's notion of a 'third space' to state that LSS occupy a role situated between pastoral and pedagogic. If this is the case, then it could be argued that a standard body of professional knowledge is less relevant than Lipsky's version of on-the-spot decision making. However, as Hardy (1970) points out when even discussing professional knowledge in social workers, this ability to navigate the third space to support the most vulnerable, may be compromised when knowledge of oneself and one's role is weakened by the kind of personal uncertainty indicated through research into LSS perceptions of their knowledge and abilities.

Professionalism as a managerial discourse: Who has control?

Professionalism has also been interpreted as set of occupational values or a discourse within which members of an organisation participate and which is controlled by managers through a process of 'occupational socialisation' (Evetts, 2013). In this interpretation of professionalism, members of an organisation are bound by a common professional identity and share a collective approach towards problem solving and service provision. Fournier (1999) described common professional identities as emerging in privatised organisations, where accountability measures and the possibility of disciplinary action create repeating patterns of self-regulation amongst individuals. In other words, professionalism is imposed on individuals within an organisation by those in control. Senior leadership decisions regarding outcome related performance management may be seen as illustrating what Fournier (1999, p281) described as the regulating of the autonomous conduct of employees through the "articulation of competence".

This managerial discourse is further impacted by the recent development of multi-academy trusts (MATs) consisting of separate Academies forming joint partnerships and operating under a board of managers, headed by a CEO. The governing structures underpinning MATs are varied and complex, resulting in individual Academies struggling to exercise autonomy due to overriding managerial influence (West & Wolfe, 2018). With regards to SEND, all schools, regardless of status are bound by the SEND Code of Practice (SEND CoP, 2015), which outlines statutory obligations towards pupils with additional needs. The SEND CoP (2015) states that senior leaders, SENDCos and teaching staff are all responsible for meeting the needs of pupils. LSS are not positioned as responsible, rather, they are mentioned only in relation to teaching staff who are described as responsible for how LSS operate in the classroom.

Managerial control over public service professionals was analysed by Braverman (1974), who described the evolution of workplace control as a process whereby managers take responsibility for determining how certain roles should be carried out, thereby alleviating any sense of ownership workers have over their own professional worth. Bach et al., (2006) argued that Braverman's analysis was relevant for scrutinising the effects of New Labour's NWA reforms with specific consideration for the increase in support staff. Through one-to-one interviews with over one hundred primary school based LSS, teachers and senior leaders, Bach et al., (2006) focused on how NWA reforms had impacted on LSS roles. Interview data indicated that whilst many teachers valued their LSS colleagues, there was a broad reluctance to delegate responsibility to LSS, and in some cases, a resentment over what teacher participants perceived as having to manage an adult within the classroom.

Within a managerial discourse of professionalism, LSS appear to lack agency. The EDTA project placed responsibility for all aspects of LSS deployment firmly with senior leaders (Blatchford et al., 2012). LSS who perceive themselves as lacking control over autonomous decision making combined with high levels of responsibility in their roles may experience workplace stress (Ravalier et al., 2021). However, Lewis (2023) draws upon theories of practice (Schatzki, 2016) to suggest that LSS may be engaging in a type of professional practice sustained through the specialised discourse of inclusion. Such a practice is formed by members of the practicing group and developed alongside existing managerial structures and is best understood through researching the experiences of LSS, rather than teachers or senior leaders.

Professional relationships

LSS are "part of the spaces that teachers inhabit … potentially shaping the role of the teacher in new and dramatic ways" (Hammersley-Fletcher & Lowe, 2011, p.79). Since one of the key incentives behind the NWA had been to reduce pressure on teachers by delegating

administrative tasks to LSS, the supportive function of LSS has been viewed as extending not only to pupils but also to teaching colleagues. Watkinson (2003) positioned teachers as directly responsible for LSS efficacy, stating that they "are only as effective as their use, deployment and management" (Watkinson, 2003, p.7). In both descriptions, LSS status is examined exclusively in relation to teachers, whilst Watkinson's statement appears to imagine LSS as non-autonomous tools.

The theme of power disparity between teachers and LSS was examined by Watson et al. (2011), who suggested that policies which were intended to boost numbers of support staff had, in fact, created a fraught dynamic between LSS and teachers. Through semi-structured interviews and focus groups sessions, six separate LSS and teacher pairs were invited to discuss how they understood their relative positions within school. Analysis of results seemed to indicate that not only did all LSS participants share a perception of themselves as occupying a lesser status than teacher colleagues, but that they had also come to accept this positioning. In contrast, teacher participants rejected the notion of perceiving themselves to be superior to LSS, however, Watson et al. (2011) suggested that the LSS may have formed identities based around deficiency in response to policy rhetoric which situated them as subordinate to teachers.

Workforce remodelling projects, such as the New Partnerships for Learning research project (NPfL 2002-2003), sought to deliver a professional development programme intended to develop teachers' ability to work productively with LSS. Wilson & Bedford (2008) invited teachers who had participated in the project to identify what qualities they most valued in their LSS counterparts and gathered reciprocal responses from LSS participants. Research primarily consisted of open-ended interviews and focus groups with eighteen respondents representing primary and secondary education. Findings indicated that the overwhelming majority of all respondents, TAs and teachers, rated the ability to work as part of a team and communicate effectively as the skills they valued most in their counterparts. The results also revealed that aside from a general consensus on teamwork and communication, the teachers interviewed were more likely to place value on the *personal* attributes of LSS (open-mindedness, conscientiousness), whilst LSS appeared to prioritise *professional* attributes as most desirable in teachers (organisation, leadership). This contrast in values may demonstrate that TA and teacher participants perceived their relationship as akin to employee and manager, echoing Watson et al.'s (2011) suggestion that LSS regarded themselves as occupying lesser positions than teachers.

Research into LSS/teacher relationships has been conducted internationally. Using a conceptual framework of partnership, Jardi et al. (2021) sought to identify factors that characterise effective interpersonal relationships between LSS and teachers. The research took place in Catalonia, involving interviews with twenty-two LSS and eighteen teachers, focusing on attributes which participants perceived as the most conducive for professional 'symbiosis'. Coded analysis of themes emerging from interview data indicated that both LSS and teachers regarded described affinity and open communication as the most significant factors for effective partnership. Where LSS and teachers differed most was in their attitude towards respect, with ten LSS participants identifying feelings of being respected professionally as crucial to effective working partnerships, compared to five teachers. Jardi et al., (2021) explained this difference by drawing attention to the perceived lower status of LSS compared to teachers. As in Wilson & Bedford's (2008) research, relationships between LSS and teachers appear to be affected by perceptions of an inherent power imbalance.

Commenting nearly ten years after the NWA was announced and using observations made during the EDTA project, Webster et al., (2013) reiterated the importance of allowing both teachers and LSS opportunity to develop effective and positively reinforcing working relationships. The notion of constructive dialogue between LSS and teachers is highlighted by Roffey-Barentsen & Watt (2014) whose research examined perceptions of self-worth across a sample of eleven TAs representing both primary and secondary schools. Results indicated that all participants reported difficulties in maintaining relationships with teaching colleagues with LSS participants expressing concerns about being perceived as making demands on teachers' time or simply not being listened to at all. Findings also revealed that LSS felt frustrated by a lack of advance planning opportunities with teachers, resulting in LSS having to adapt to fit unpredictable situations.

The relationship between LSS and teachers reveals something of an impasse whereby LSS may perceive themselves as occupying a lower rung of the school hierarchy, whilst teachers are concerned about the impact on their own professional identities of blurring the lines between support and teaching. Qualitative research conducted by Emira (2011) focused on LSS aspirations towards management, concluding that the majority of LSS participants indicated a preference for achieving some *collaborative* management status alongside colleagues over more formal models of management. What collaborative management looks like in practice is unclear, but it could possibly be the solution the impasse outlined above.

Conclusion

This article has examined the historical context of the LSS role in England and drawn upon different understandings of the term 'professional' to assess whether LSS can be defined as such. In some ways, this has raised more questions about what it means to 'be a professional'. For example, it can be argued that a higher salary does not necessarily equate professional *worth*, however, the combined factors of low wages and few progression routes within their roles render LSS as possessing little professional *status*. The question of *why* LSS choose, or perhaps, find themselves in these roles, may be addressed by looking beyond traditional theories of workplace learning that tend to disregard the role of emotional learning within professional identity development. Benozzo and Colley (2012) argued that neo-liberal education systems create a conflict for educational professionals who may be attempting to balance professional values and care alongside scarcity of resources. Drawing upon Arlie Hothschild's (1979) work on emotional commodification, Benozzo and Colley suggested that some professional roles, usually performed by women, require high degrees of emotion management whilst offering low salary and prestige

In terms of specialised knowledge, it is difficult to provide a picture of the scope of formal qualifications held by all LSS: this data simply does not exist. Despite a lack of formal qualification requirements, LSS can be understood as possessing a knowledge of 'uncertainty' (Hardy, 1970), that enables them to identify and explain their decision-making processes. However, this ability to make decisions on a day-to-day basis may not be viewed as sufficiently valid without the accompaniment of some form of official pedagogic training (Brown & Devecchi, 2013).

Differing perspectives on the origin of professionalism imagine professionalism as either imposed by managers or developed through group narratives. Evetts (2013) distinguished these two perspectives under the headings: organisational professionalism, and occupational professionalism. The former focuses on managerial hierarchies and standardised procedures whilst the latter focuses on client-practitioner relationships and trust as the source of professionalism. Policy influencing research projects, such as the EDTA, would appear to position LSS as subject to the professionalism of others within the organisation, rather than as professionals in their own right. However, small-scale qualitative studies (Watson et al., 2011; Roffey-Barentsen & Watt, 2014) have indicated that LSS may regard themselves as most ably placed to make decisions about supporting pupils on a one to one or small group basis. This article paints a picture of a role that can be credibly described as 'professional' by those who perform that role. What is not clear, is whether policy makers, casual observers, or even those employed alongside as senior school leaders or teachers possess the same view. Little significant attention has been paid to LSS since New Labour's workplace reforms. This, coupled with low salaries, ambiguous responsibilities, a lack of qualification criteria and few internal progression routes have served to keep the public perception of LSS mired in a no man's land where it is perhaps too inconvenient to acknowledge that the days of paint pot washing are long gone.

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