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Teaching assistant role in a school in Sweden

An ethnographic case study

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Abstract

Keywords: teaching assistant role, professional development, employment

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The aim of this study is to explore the role of the teaching assistants in a school in Sweden by highlighting their deployment, employment and the needs of this role. This aim stems from the limited research on teaching assistants, the paucity in research that could not support decision making of the policy-makers and the belief that teaching assistants are under-used resource.

Activity theory will be used for the above purposes as it investigates the complexities of real life and it has been used in case studies. This study will, also, produce a model of the TA activity and explore how activity theory could be used relating the development of the TAs in their workplace.

For investigating this role, ethnographic case study was chosen in order to reveal the complexity of the situation and to highlight the regularities and patterns in the behaviour of the participants. The semi-structured interviews and participant-observation provided the study with valuable data which composed a holistic perspective of the situation. Data were organised in categories and then analysed with content analysis.

The findings, which were generated from the analysis, concern the name of the TAs, their activity, the relationships between the TAs and the teachers, the training of the TAs and the employment conditions of this job position. To be more specific, the name does not affect the TA activity but it affects their employment as it can be misleading. TA activity entails the tasks that TAs have and the factors that interact for achieving the objectives. The findings of this study highlighted the nature of the tasks that the TAs have. They have not only practical and social tasks but also tasks that involve teaching. Two of the factors that affect their activity are the communities to which they belong and, mostly, the teachers. Although, assistants do not reduce teacher workload with their activity, teachers emerge as an important factor in TA role as they cooperate a lot. This cooperation brings up issues regarding the communication and time which need to be addressed in order to work efficiently. The training of the TAs is highlighted as another issue that needs to be addressed as assistants do not always have the qualification to fulfill their tasks. Last, the findings indicate an employment that depends on school criteria, the characteristics of the local labour market, no job description, positions' stability for young classes and a job position that is combined with the recreational (fritids) programme.

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Contents

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List of abbreviations

TA   Teaching Assistant

AT   Activity Theory

SA   Student Assistant

SEN   Special Educational Needs

CHAT   Cultural Historical Activity Theory

CRC   Rights of the Child

HLTA   Higher Level Teaching Assistant

SKOLFS   Skolverkets författningssamling

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the topic of the study which is the role of the teaching assistants (TA) and highlights the problematic nature of this role in education systems of various countries before placed within the Swedish context. Then, the rationale of the study encompasses the prominent reasons that make further investigation of this role imperative, and it results in the aim of the study and the research questions. The chapter concludes with the structure of the study designed according to the aim and the research questions.

Background of research

The topic of the study is the role of the TAs in a school in Sweden. TAs consist a group that is characterized by various ambiguities with respect to their name, deployment, which will be used interchangeably with the phrase 'use of TAs', and employment, which will entail both the TA employment conditions and the use of the role of the TAs. This study focuses on the use of TAs and the use of the role of the TAs in order to clarify what they do in a school and how their job position is used by the school and/ or policy. Literature has highlighted main issues that future research should address in order to clarify the problematic nature of the TA role in terms of name, deployment and employment.

TAs have been the object of many debates (Farrell et al., 2010; Kerry, 2005; Takala, 2007; Warhurst et al., 2014) mostly regarding their names and their deployment. The names of the TA vary not only among different countries but also in one country such as in the UK (Butt and Lance, 2009) where there are many names to describe those who provide support in a school. The variety of the names and job titles (Kerry, 2005) mirror the various tasks that a TA has and which might enclose various types of TAs and roles (Kerry, 2005; Harris and Aprile, 2015; Skär and Tamm, 2001) both in mainstream and special education (Takala, 2007). This variety in tasks and roles could lead to debates on the deployment of the assistants. The debates on their deployment could be related, for example, to the worthiness of the role in student attainment and in students with special educational needs (SEN) learning, to the relationship with the teachers, and teacher workload (Farrell et al., 2010; Kerry, 2005). Both the debates on TA names and the debates on their deployment emanates from a not clearly defined role (Batch et al., 2006; Butt and Lance, 2009; Curby et al. 2012; Ferguson, 2014; Thorup and Thorup, 2006; Ward, 2011; Kerry, 2005; Takala, 2007). The not clarified role does not only initiate debates but also leads to an ineffective use of the TAs (Kerry, 2005).

The debates about the TA employment (Farrell et al., 2010) indicate a problematic use of the role. TA role is full of inconsistencies in terms of payment, employment and job description for which government policies are responsible (Fergusson, 2014). Nevertheless, TAs' presence in schools is increased (Butt and Lance, 2009; Bach at al., 2006; Farrell et al., 2010; Warhurst et al., 2014; Kerry, 2005), for example, in England, TAs comprise around 25% of the workforce in education area (Butt and Lance, 2009).

The above debates could indicate an overall problematic use of the TAs and of the role in education systems in many countries. The problematic use could be attributed to the increase of a group of employees with no specific name, clear role

and clear employment conditions. These characteristics create a problematic situation because they would not facilitate the effective use of the role in a school.

Teaching Assistant role in Sweden

There are two groups of TAs who work in schools in Sweden. There are the TAs who support for students with SEN and those who support for teachers. The former are called elevassistent (student assistant) (Thorup and Thorup, 2006; SKOLFS 2007:12; SKOLFS 2011:68) and the latter are called lärarassistent (teacher assistant) (Kommunal, n.d.). Earlier research and legislation about student assistants indicate further investigation of the role of the student assistants than the teacher assistants. Teacher assistants have not had a clear role in Swedish education system or attracted attention but they remain one of the components of the education system.

In Sweden, the student assistants are part of the inclusive education provision. Since 1990s, there has been an inclusive policy supported by a number of laws that promoted the full participation and equality in terms of play, different recreational activities, being with peers and school attendance of students with disabilities and restricted mobility (Skär and Tamm, 2001). The school act (1991) provided children and adolescents with the right to have personal assistance through the employment of school support by the school. Later, LSS (1994) was the law relating to the support and service for persons with certain functional impairments. Swedish policy was also in line with the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1990) and in 1999, Sweden adopted the National strategy for the implementation of the CRC, The International Save the Children's Alliance (Skär and Tamm, 2001). Nevertheless, LSS created a misleading type of employment as there were no details on the regulation of assistants' employment and no recommendations regarding education (Skär and Tamm, 2001). In addition to their misleading employment, student assistants had been characterized as an under-researched group whose role in schools was not clarified. Assistants had school-based responsibilities which were not described in policy documents (Thorup and Thorup, 2006) and research had provided information about five different types of student assistants (Skär and Tamm, 2001). In 2007, the issue of student assistant education was addressed. Student assistants should have specific education gained through a course in order to become eligible to work as elevassistent (SKOLFS 2007:12; SKOLFS 2011:68).

This group of assistants has attracted more attention as they are a means to inclusive education and their role has been explored more than teacher assistant. Teacher assistants have been working in schools as part of the general support that a school provides. The little available information about this role indicates the limited attention that it has attracted as a mechanism in the education system.

Teacher assistants are part of the trade union Kommunal (Kommunal, n.d.). According to the information that is available about this job position, teacher assistants do not have specific qualifications, they support the classroom teacher and they have a variety of tasks, for example, the creation of a good working atmosphere in the classroom, support to the students so that the teacher can work with students' progress and challenges.

One could argue that, according to this information, the assistants who are called teaching assistants, teacher aides, classroom support or similar in other countries are the elevassistent in Sweden and that the Swedish education system has only eleveassistent working as assistants. Nevertheless, the profession of the

lärarassistent exists also in Sweden. It could be argued, thus, that there are assistants used both for the promotion of inclusion and for classroom teacher support. Therefore, 'lärarassistent' is neither just the translation of other countries' names referring to assistants nor a synonym of 'elevassistent' because these two terms are used to describe two different job positions. This study will use the term TA to refer to the employees who are called teacher assistants in Sweden and to those who are employed as assistants in other countries and they have been called with various names such as classroom assistants, learning assistants, teaching assistants or similar.

Rationale

Teacher assistants, or here called TAs, are under-researched in Sweden. The prominent reasons that make further investigation of the TA role imperative could be summarized in three reasons. Firstly, TAs are an under-researched group (Warhurst et al., 2014; Takala, 2007) whose presence in schools increases in an obscure way in terms of name, deployment and employment (Kerry, 2005). Secondly, paucity in research does not facilitate education reforms (Butt and Lance, 2009; Bach et al., 2006) that could illuminate TA role and promote the effective use of this role. Last, TAs are considered a powerful and under-used resource (Ward, 2011; Fergusson, 2014) that could contribute into school improvement and student achievement (Farrell, 2010; Butt and Lance, 2009).

Kerry (2005) argues that the very presence of the TAs in schools that has increased in an unclear way makes further research imperative (Ward, 2011). Despite the recognition of the existence of the TAs (McVittie, 2005; Kerry, 2005), Swann and Loxley (1998) argue that there is little attention that has been paid to TAs which was also argued many years later (Warhurst et al., 2014; Takala, 2007). Further research is also important to both policy and practice (Ward, 2011). As Takala (2007) argues, more research is needed in order to bridge the gap between current knowledge and classroom practice of TAs. Therefore, paucity in research creates a gap in education reforms that attempt to clarify TA role in schools (Butt and Lance, 2009; Bach et al., 2006) while Farrell et al. (2010) argue that schools and local authorities need to have clear objectives when appointing them to the TAs. Fergusson et al., (2014) and Ward (2011) claim that TAs are a powerful but under-used resource due to not only the unclear roles but also because of the TA training and management. To be more specific, Fergusson et al., (2014), Ward (2011) and Farrell et al. (2010) argue that TAs' pre- and in- service training as well as teachers' pre- and in- service training on how to use the TAs can lead to TAs' effectiveness and an effective use of them. Further training and better management are needed as the TAs can drive standards up in schools if they are both well trained and well managed (Farrell et al. 2010).

These three reasons suggest further research on a role which is unclear and is not used effectively in schools but it constitutes a potential means for school improvement. This study attempts to elucidate the role of the TAs, the way in which this role is used in a school in Sweden and the needs of this role.

Aim of the research

The aim of this research is to explore what TAs do in a school in Sweden and what kind of needs would be dictated by the way in which the TA role is used in the school.

Research questions:

1. What is the activity of the Teaching Assistants in the school?

   Sub-question:

   o How does Teaching Assistant activity support student learning and teachers?
2. How is the role of the Teaching Assistants used in a school?
3. What are the needs for the Teaching Assistant role?

Structure of the research

The structure of this research was designed based on the aim and the research questions and it consists of six chapters. The following chapter is the literature review which describes the findings of previous international and national studies on the TA role. It includes a review of the literature related to TAs. The review focuses on issues that have been raised about assistants such as their name, their deployment which previous studies had attempted to clarify and TA employment in schools in Sweden and in other countries as well. Chapter three describes the theoretical framework that will be used in order to approach this role. It describes Activity Theory and how it will be used as the theoretical framework in order to approach the activity of the TAs. It, also, justifies the selection of this theory and its relevance to the purposes of the study and design. The methods and the methodology that were used are presented in Chapter four where the research design is described analytically. This chapter describes the methodology and the methods that this study will use in order to answer the research questions. The research design is ethnographic case study and the methodological tools that will be used are interviews, observations, a reflexive journal and documents. This chapter addresses, also, the issues of trustworthiness and ethics. After this chapter, there is Chapter five which displays the findings, their analysis and the discussion. Findings are organized into themes and then they are interpreted according to Activity Theory. The study concludes with Chapter six which includes the conclusion of the study. This part highlights the way in which this research design answered the research questions and discusses some implications in terms of school, policy and teachers. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future research and the limitations of the conduct of this research.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter will describe the TA role in terms of deployment and employment. First, a clarification of the name that this study will employ is vital as there is a plethora of names used for the assistants. Then, a brief literature review will attempt to present the ways in which the TAs have been used, how earlier studies attempted to elucidate the role of the TAs and, how this role has been used. The chapter concludes with the main factors that affect the role and the reasons why further research on the clarification of the TA role is needed.

Assistant name(s)

The term that this study chose to use, among many names, for describing a job position that offers assistance within a classroom is Teaching Assistant (TA). Although, teaching assistant is a term that has been used as an umbrella term for a variety of support staff within schools (McVittie, 2005), this study does not focus on the connection of the name to the role but on the role itself. More specifically, the term TA will not be used to describe whether or not the assistant supports the teaching process as the name suggests, instead, the term will be used to describe what the people who were employed to provide support in the classroom do.

According to Kerry (2005) and Balshaw and Farrell (2002), there are many names describing this job position throughout the world. These include 'teacher aide' (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Ward, 2011; Ferguson, 2014), 'teaching assistant' (Farrell, 2010; Bach et al., 2006; Butt and Lance, 2009; Webster et al., 2013; McVittie, 2005), 'classroom assistants' (Warhurst et al., 2014; Woolfson & Truswell, 2005; Kerry, 2005; Takala, 2007) and 'learning support assistants' (Kerry, 2005).

The names with which TAs are called differ amongst countries and they do not always imply the tasks for which this person is responsible. For example, in the UK TAs are called teaching assistants, classroom assistants, classroom support assistants, classroom learning assistants, and non-teaching adults and they have the same general role despite the name they use.

> 'Teaching Assistant' (TA) is the generic title preferred by the government for those in paid employment in support of teachers, including those with general roles, or those with specific responsibilities for a child, subject area or age group. In essence TAs can provide support for the pupil, the teacher, the curriculum and the school. In England other terms exist of the TA's role, including Classroom Assistant, Classroom Support Assistant, Classroom Learning Assistant, and Non-Teaching Adult.
>
> (Butt and Lance, 2009, p.230)

While in Australia TAs are called teacher aides and they have a wide range of tasks which include involvement in teaching and learning processes, and resource preparation.

> Teacher Aides support teaching and learning in Queensland state schools. They work closely with teachers, developing and obtaining resources, setting up and operating equipment,

undertaking administrative duties, supervising students and participating in teaching activities under the direction of a teacher. They provide a wide range of support for students who need assistance to participate in educational activities and achieve learning outcomes.

<div align="right">(Harris and Aprile, 2015, p.140)</div>

The two descriptions above share some characteristics but they also have differences. Firstly, the two descriptions utilize different names for the TAs but they both refer to a wide range of responsibilities. Secondly, although they both refer to the same general role which is support for pupil, teacher, curriculum and school, the second description is clearer about the tasks that a TA could have.

The differences between the two descriptions could indicate the level of earlier and the need for further research in the two countries. For example, the clearer tasks in Australia could imply more or extended research on TA role, and the UK's general role could have been government's choice to use TAs in more cases that could be characterized, for example, as 'support for school'. The general role in relation to the variety of the names that actually are used for the same role in the UK highlight a need for a clarification of the name as there is no practical use in having different names for one job position.

In the descriptions of the two countries mentioned above, there is not a distinction between the assistants who support for students with SEN and those who support for teachers or students without SEN. This distinction is made in Sweden, where the assistants are called 'elevassistent' (student assistant) (Thorup and Thorup, 2006; SKOLFS 2077:12; SKOLFS 2011:68) and 'lärarassistent' (teacher assistant) (Kommunal, n.d.) based on the person who are supposed to assist; i.e. a student with SEN or a teacher. Unfortunately, this distinction is not common in other countries where the same assistants are used both in mainstream and special education. A distinction between the names and the roles such as the one in Sweden could facilitate assistants' training and effective use as they could have clear tasks and the respective qualification.

According to the above, one could conclude that the names that the TAs have in different countries do not always indicate the tasks they have. Therefore, the name of the assistants is important to be clarified firstly, because it implies the kind of tasks and responsibilities that TAs have in a school and, secondly, because names send out a message to teachers, parents and authority (McVittie, 2005). What is challenging in defining the name is that it is the TA role that needs to be defined first (Kerry, 2005). A role that is difficult to be defined mostly because it covers a wide range of tasks and about which there is not much information because it is under-researched.

Clarification of the TA role and the use of the role

Literature showed that there is a variety of the names that TAs have and a wide range of assistance with which they can provide a school (Takala, 2007). This section will describe the role of the TAs by focusing on the tasks in which they are engaged and the assistance they provide most often. Then, two studies that focus on the clarification of the TA role (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Kerry, 2005) will be presented. Finally, this role cannot be seen separately from the national policies about the way in which it is used. Therefore, this section will also focus on the use of the TA job position from behalf of schools and policy.

TA role

The role and the tasks that TAs have are not only various but they are also not clear. TAs result having a variety of tasks for which they do not have always the proper qualification or respective reward (Ward, 2011; Bach et al., 2006). According to the findings of previous studies, most often mentioned tasks are related to traditional responsibilities, inclusive education provision and teaching/ para-professional roles.

Previous studies indicate that the responsibilities which the TAs traditionally have are photocopying, and resource preparation (Ferguson, 2014; Harris and Aprile, 2015), for instance, cutting paper, mixing paints and glue, tidying the resource room and sharpening pencils (Ward, 2011; McVittie, 2005), as well as domestic, administrative (Butt and Lance, 2009) and clerical work such as typing, playground supervision (Ferguson, 2014). TAs would not need further training for fulfilling all these tasks (Ferguson, 2014).

During the 1980s and 1990s, the international movement towards inclusion added more responsibilities in assistants' tasks. The importance of having TAs working among children with SEN (McVittie, 2005; Ward, 2011) was stated in the United Nation Resolution Education for All (UNESCO, 1997) and Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994).

> 32. For children with special educational needs a continuum of support should be provided, ranging from minimal help in regular classrooms to additional learning support programmes within the school and extending, where necessary, to the provision of assistance from specialist teachers and external support staff.
>
> (Salamanca Statement, 1994, p.22)

Therefore, the special needs provision and the employment of the TAs in order to provide support for students with SEN led not only to the increase of support staff in mainstream schools (Ward, 2011; McVittie, 2005; Harris and Aprile, 2015), but also to a shift of the TA responsibilities.

Student assistants in Sweden, like TAs in other countries, are used mostly for promoting inclusion and thus they are widely used for SEN student support (Skär and Tamm, 2001; Thorup and Thorup, 2006; Bach et al., 2006; Ferguson, 2014; Ward 2011). What has been raised by literature, though, is the fact that education and qualification for such responsibilities are not a prerequisite in all countries, for example, in the UK, Australia (Butt and Lowe, 2012) and Finland (Takala, 2007), while, on the other hand, in other countries such as New Zealand and Sweden there are university courses for these assistants (Fergusson et al., 2014; SKOLFS, 2007: 12; SKOLFS 2011: 68). What is interesting is that even in New Zealand TAs' practices excluded students from academic and social learning, and contact with their teachers (Ward, 2011). This could occur because the roles are not clearly defined, there is no clear perception of the level of the involvement of the TAs in academic learning, there is little (if any) training and support, TAs are not included in planning meetings and they do not have specific training for 'their' student. A consequence of such deployment of the TAs could lead to the failure of inclusion instead of promotion. This issue lifts up TA training and qualifications in international level because 'sometimes the assistants receive too demanding tasks; assigning the least trained

persons to spend the greatest amount of time with the most demanding students is unethical, but still it happens' (Takala, 2007, p.51).

According to the above, the obscure role of the TAs and mostly their educational background emerges as main factors that affect student learning and the promotion of inclusion. Nevertheless, TAs' educational background is equally important for supporting students without SEN. In both cases TA support is not always effective and there is no academic benefit for the students (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Farrell et al., 2010) when assistants have low level of educational attainment (Bach et al. 2006; Ferguson, 2014). Subsequently, further training is suggested by researchers because TA support can have positive impact on student learning (Ferguson, 2014), when they are trained and/ or supported (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Farrell et al., 2010) and thus be effectively involved in pedagogical praxis (Butt and Lance, 2009).

The involvement of the TAs in learning and teaching process has been increased due to the inclusive education provision policies, and the support to students without SEN (Ferguson, 2014). Unfortunately, this level of involvement makes the role more complicated as it raises issues regarding not only the training and qualifications of the TAs in teaching and supporting student learning, but also the communication and boundaries between the TA and the teacher, and, even, the teacher job satisfaction. TAs' involvement in teaching could both be related both to student learning support and to teaching roles.

An example of using the TAs in teaching roles exclusively comes from the UK where it has been attempted to use the assistants in teaching roles. The shift of the TA role aimed to the clarification of the role of the assistants and to the support of the needs the teachers have. Although there is a general role for the TAs in the UK, and which was mentioned earlier, the government has attempted to create clear qualification pathways for TAs and utilize them mostly in paraprofessional roles because TAs have been seen as a means to support teachers and teaching.

The findings of Butt and Lance's (2009) project indicated that training and a shift of the traditional roles of the TAs have a positive impact on teacher workload and job satisfaction -as other researchers also claim (Farrell et al., 2010)- and a change in role boundaries between the teachers and the TAs. According to this findings of this project, teachers recognize TAs as a resource that can be used further and contribute more in a paraprofessional role. To be more specific, around half of the teachers, who were asked whether TAs consist an under-used resource or not, answered that TAs are under-used, and there was also a supportive response on behalf of teachers for remodeling. This argument, though, is opposite to Willkinson's (2005) who refers to teachers' concerns for TAs taking over their responsibilities. After this project in which the assistants were used in para-professional/ teaching roles, TAs' new roles were characterized by diversity, some of the traditional work remained while not all the TAs wanted to become a teacher or associate teacher. The outcome was the creation of many different kinds of TAs working for teacher support in different ways.

Butt and Lance's (2009) findings are generated by a case study and the authors used the findings as they were emerged in specific schools -among those that participated in the project- so we cannot generalize them. Nevertheless, the findings were verified by later and verified earlier studies of Farrell et al. (2010) and Bach et al. (2006), respectively. They, also, argue that TAs could contribute into the reduction

of teacher workload and job satisfaction which could not only help teachers' work but also solve problems related to teacher retention.

As TAs are getting more involved in teaching and learning processes, defining their role is getting more challenging as it raises issues of boundaries and management. The first question, thus, before using TAs could be related to teacher needs, for example. whether there is a need for reducing teacher workload or retention so that TAs could be used in teaching roles (Butt and Lance, 2009) or whether there is a need to use more than one educated adults in teaching and facilitate other/ new ways of working as Takala (2007) suggests.

According to the literature, the role of the TAs could include both simple and demanding tasks. In general, TA role is characterized by various tasks as TAs have tasks with respect to the support for a. the pupil, b. the teacher, c. the curriculum and d. the school, and also support for students with SEN (Kerry, 2005; McVittie, 2005). After a study on the work of TAs in special and mainstream education, Takala (2007) found that the TAs in Finland have also a variety of tasks that cover a wide range of assistance '… helping the pupil; helping the teacher; guiding the learning situation; working as a substitute teacher; being part of the extended learning team; or being a person who does almost everything.' (Takala, 2007, p.51). This variety in the tasks indicates the level of further research on the role of the TAs that is needed.

Clarification of the TA role

The TA role and the tasks that have been assigned to them is a complicated issue. Harris and Aprile (2015) and Kerry (2005) worked on the role of the TAs in order to clarify this issue. The findings of the two studies allow a level of clarification as they both point to the same direction regarding the nature of the tasks that this role has.

To begin with, the findings of Harris and Aprile's (2015) study align a role closer to what Takala (2007) refers to as 'a person who does almost everything'. They argue that role issues are some of the problems related to the effective deployment of the TAs. Thus, they investigated the role through role theory, and they approached it through social behaviors as developed within particular social environments. Their results indicated eighteen (18) roles but they organized them into two broader; the instructional role (planning for teaching or student assessment, classroom support, academic work with groups, one to one support with students with SEN, catch up work outside the classroom) and non-instructional role (administrative duties, first aid, medication responsibilities, playground and bus duties, behavior management, union representatives, extra-curricular activities). These roles could be also related to earlier research that points towards a non instructional role, for example, involvement in students' emotional support and organizing rather than an instructional role (Curby et al., 2012).

These findings shed light on the aspects of the TA role that need to be further researched and reconsidered. The diverse nature of the multi-skilled TAs, that Harris and Aprile's (2015) study highlighted, is linked to a weakened overall efficiency. This diversity could not facilitate TA training relating to all aspects of their work and the type of sustained professional learning that researchers suggest so that the professional practice would be enhanced. Therefore, the TA role needs to be clarified so that TAs can work effectively and be trained respectively.

Another study that approaches TA role is Kerry's (2005) synthesis of available literature and research. Kerry attempts to develop a typology which could contribute into a better understanding of the deployment of the TAs and which might help to clarify TAs' training needs. Kerry used the literature and previous research findings and results and generated a typology of TA roles. The findings indicate a variety of low level and higher level roles -based on the responsibilities that the TAs have in a school- that could contribute into the debate around the question what TAs do. The organized information on the roles of the TAs in Kerry's work could be verified in different contexts but we cannot generalize them as Kerry's work was based on the findings of other studies that used the school-based responsibilities of the assistants. This typology remains a collection of the needs of different schools, teachers and classrooms or possible ways that TAs can be used.

This study has similar findings with Harris and Aprile's (2015) regarding the types that the role of the assistants might have. The similarities in the findings shows not only that nothing has changed during a decade but also that there can be a pattern in TA responsibilities that could help policy-makers organize the deployment of the assistants and their training in order to use them effectively. For example, in the UK, the higher level roles are those that promote student learning and involve tasks that are paraprofessional/ pedagogical and they are assigned to the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA). This way of using the TAs in the UK is related to government's intention to use them in teaching roles which is not common in other countries where assistants are used mostly for promoting inclusion. Kerry (2005), McVittie (2005) and Butt and Lance (2009) refer to the UK's commitment and effort on clarifying this role in schools and providing qualification pathways because government is confident for the contribution of the TAs into school improvement (Butt and Lance, 2009).

To summarize, the TA role is characterized by diversity in the tasks (Kerry, 2005; Harris and Aprile, 2015), a diversity which is related to the effective use and effectiveness of the TAs (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Kerry, 2005; Takala, 2007). The simple and demanding tasks in relation to the not respective qualifications make the TA an ineffective choice and a waste of money (Kerry, 2005). Therefore, it could be argued that the effective use and effectiveness of the assistants could depend on a refined role and training according to the tasks.

The use of the TA role

The diversity in responsibilities and qualification described above has not been an obstacle in the employment of the TAs so far, as their presence increases (Butt and Lance, 2009; Bach at al., 2006; Farrell et al., 2010; Warhurst et al., 2014; Kerry, 2005). Kerry (2005) argues that the very increased presence of the TAs in education systems in this hazard way -as they do not have clarified tasks, training- is exactly what makes further attention to them imperative, especially, paid by policy-makers (Bach et al., 2006).

Policy-makers should not pay attention only to the use of the assistants and the clarification of their role just in terms of deployment but in conjunction with this they should also review the use of the role of the TAs because as Takala (2007) argues TA employment is an area that needs improvement. It is argued that their employment is based on factors such as local requirements and characteristics of local labor market (Bach et al., 2006). The job position is school-based (Bach et al., 2006) and the TA employment depends on school criteria. Furthermore, as there is no provision for this position, their employment is based on the available funding (Ferguson, 2014; Bach et

al. 2006) which leads to low salary (Takala, 2007), incoherent payment structures (Ferguson, 2014), and pay conditions determined at local level (Butt and Lance, 2009), and to little job security (Ferguson, 2014; Takala, 2007). In New Zealand, the payment conditions depend on TAs' skills, qualifications and responsibility (Ferguson, 2014) but this case could not be generalized. Under these conditions TAs' presence in schools increases and they consist a large and stable component of school workforce (Bach et al. 2006). The above characteristics of TA employment lead to a job position that could be characterized as temporary, inconsistent and periodic (Ferguson, 2014). Eventually, it is the management of the assistants that is challenged because the TAs do not have a clear job description, clear management line, and clear means of reviewing tasks (Butt and Lance, 2009) as a stable component of the school.

Literature highlighted a few contradictions in the current use of the TA role. To be more specific, although their employment is flexible and school-based, the presence of the TAs in schools is stable (Bach et al. 2006) and increases. Moreover, there is not a job description, education prerequisites and reward (Ferguson, 2014) but they have both instructional and non instructional tasks. These contradictions indicate the unclear employment conditions of the TAs and point towards important issues that need to be addressed by policy-makers.

The unclear and different among the countries use of the TAs and of the role of the TAs cannot be seen separately from the national policies. Policies lead to the deployment and employment conditions according to the intentions of policy-makers in using the TAs as a mechanism in education system. For example, on the one hand, there are countries where policies do not provide a clear framework according to which TA role is defined and used, and, on the other hand, there are countries where policies attempt to utilize TAs effectively through the clarification of their role and a more clear way of using this job position.

New Zealand and Sweden are two countries where, even though there are university courses for assistants, the policy does not provide a clear framework about the TA role and the use of this role. Ferguson (2014) raises issues of the deployment of the TAs in schools in New Zealand, where there is no national policy regarding the way in which schools should use them. The author argues that the absence of policy could be seen as a path that government chooses to follow in order to keep the expenses of inclusive education provision low (Ferguson, 2014). Subsequently, the TA employment could be seen as an act of deskilling and cheapening the labor process in a broader context of society's structure during the era of marketized education (Butt and Lance, 2009; Bach et al., 2006) with no benefit for the students. There is a paradox, though, in this use of the TAs as one would expect that schools would try to use them effectively in order to be able to compete in this labor market. However, as there is no provision about the funding, even if schools employed qualified TAs for educational purposes, it would not have been an act of deskilling but only of cheapening the labor. Consequently, by not having policy about the use of the TA role, policy-makers promote inclusion in low expenses but with no quality and effectiveness.

In New Zealand, TAs are used mostly for promoting inclusion while in Sweden, assistants are used for both promoting inclusion (student assistants) and supporting the teacher (teacher assistants). The policy about the SAs (elevassistnent) who promote inclusion has been identified in the different laws that obtain the possibility to assistance (Skär and Tamm, 2001, p.917) and students have the right to

have special assistance (Skollagen, 2010:800) and assistants for personal support in school employed by the school authorities; (Schools Act, 1991). The special assistance and the action plan that were mentioned in Skollagen (2010:800) are also mentioned in Skolverket (2015). More specifically:

> Special support is provided for a longer time period and is more extensive. Examples of special support are a special education teacher who works with the pupil for a long time, special teaching groups or a pupil's assistant who follows the pupil throughout most of the school day.

Nevertheless, earlier than 2007, the law did not specify the way in which the personal assistants are employed and did not have recommendations with respect to their education which can be misleading for the employer and the assistant (Skär and Tamm, 2001). In 2007, the SKOLFS (2007:12) provided the framework according to which the SAs (elevassistent) should be educated. However, there is no policy or official document regarding the education or the use of the TAs who support the teacher (lärarassistent) which can be misleading for both the employer and the employee.

On the other hand, an example of a government that attempts to clarify the TA role is the UK which has provided qualifications pathways to TAs. The government provides the TAs with the opportunity for professional development in order to enhance their professional practice through clear qualifications pathways. The national policy attempts to utilize TAs in an effective way as they are considered a powerful or/and under-used resource (Ferguson, 2014; Ward, 2011; Butt and Lance, 2009). TAs could be considered an under-used resource because of their limited training, teachers' lack of knowledge on how to use TAs effectively, no clear role definition and lack of inclusive school policies that creates obstacles in student learning (Ward, 2011). A national policy would create a framework within which the TAs would work in order to utilize this resource effectively.

Nevertheless, TAs remain under-used as not only there are not policies regarding their role, but also because some schools are not addressing issues relating to the use of this resource (Ward, 2011). Unfortunately, as the schools do not address issues regarding the use of the TAs, they overlook their effective use as stable part of their workforce. Takala (2007) suggests a way for an effective use of the TAs in schools through their development. The author suggests Engeström's model for developmental work research for the development of this group. Nevertheless, it could be challenging for the TAs to improve their professional work without having a clarified role. The developmental work could be facilitated better if, first, TAs' activity was clarified.

In conclusion, the use of the TA role tends to be characterized by unaddressed issues about assistants' effective use by the schools, and an employment based on the characteristics of the local labor market and school criteria. Policy-makers could facilitate the effective use and effectiveness of the TAs by providing pathways that support their employment and improve their practice. So far, current policies reproduce a state of insecurity and misleading -for both the employer and the employee- employment because they do not provide a clear framework which in a marketized education is interpreted as a cost-effective way for promoting inclusion and as a way of degrading labor.

Factors that influence the TA role

International and national studies indicate different approaches of the role of the assistants and the use of such role. TAs have been used in many ways in schools, for example, for classroom support, student with or without SEN and teacher support in instructional and non- instructional roles. These roles have not been supported by policies which make TA employment misleading and which lead to an ineffective use of the TAs and to their ineffectiveness. According to the findings of previous research, there are four components that have been raised as central to the approach of TA role. These are TA professional development, the cooperation between the TAs and the teachers, the school and the policy.

Professional development and pre- and in- service training are related to the effectiveness of the assistants in learning and teaching processes and to their professional practice (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Farrell et al., 2010). TA professional development emerged as vital because TAs are not able to benefit students academically if they are not trained or supported by the teacher (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Farrell et al., 2010). Such training is suggested not only for the promotion of inclusion (Ward, 2011; Ferguson, 2014) and student learning, but also for the effective use of the TAs in para-professional roles (Butt and Lance, 2009). In addition, professional development can enhance professional practice (Harris and Aprile, 2015). TA professional development has been suggested by researchers for both the promotion of student learning and school improvement.

The cooperation between the teachers and the TAs is also a main component of the TA role because effective collaboration could benefit both the adults and the students (Ferguson, 2014). Such cooperation could be challenged by the boundaries and the management of the TAs. Although boundaries and management issues were raised earlier in this text by the para-professional roles of the TAs (Butt and Lance, 2009), such issues could be also raised in other cases by the not clarified role that the TAs have. The management and the boundaries affect directly TA role as they could both facilitate cooperation and create tensions that would be obstacles in the work of both the teachers and the TAs.

Schools consist another component that affects the TA role. The number of the assistants has been increased and TAs consist a stable component of school workforce (Bach et al., 2006). However, the schools employ assistants while there are no clear policies about their employment and management. Furthermore, they do not always address issues about TAs, although the ineffectiveness of the assistants influences educational practice. The employment and management of the TAs is an element of TA role that should be taken under consideration because such use of the role could have no academic benefit for the students and be considered a waste of money (Kerry, 2005).

Policy-makers influence TA role and the use of this role by providing or not a framework about their employment and deployment. Policies about clear roles provide a framework in which TAs could be trained and used effectively like in the UK (Butt and Lance, 2009). In the cases of not clear policies there is a risk for policy-makers to be characterized as responsible for deskilling and cheapening the labor (Butt and Lance, 2009; Bach et al., 2006).

Further research of the TA role

Literature review has provided with some of the reasons about the need for the clarification of TA role. The reasons why further research on this role is needed are the problematic nature of the name of the assistants, their ineffectiveness and ineffective use which is related to the various roles and the need for training, and the little information about them.

The name of the TAs needs to be clarified because the names vary among the countries. The clarification of the name is needed because it implies the kind of tasks and responsibilities that assistants have in a school, and because the names send out a message to teachers, parents and authority (McVittie, 2005). Kerry (2005) argues that there is a need to clarify the role before/ in order to define the name.

TA role needs to be further researched because it affects their deployment and respective training. The diverse nature of the multi-skilled TAs, which Harris and Aprile's (2015) study highlighted, is linked to a weakened overall efficiency. This diversity could not facilitate the training of the assistants relating to all aspects of their work and the type of sustained professional learning that researchers suggest. Therefore, the TA role needs to be clarified so that the TAs can be trained according to their tasks and work effectively.

Last, literature highlighted the little information about the TAs because they are an under-researched group which has a not clarified role (Batch et al., 2006; Butt and Lance, 2009; Curby et al. 2012; Ferguson, 2014; Thorup and Thorup, 2006; Ward, 2011; Kerry, 2005; Takala, 2007). Policy- makers need further research of this role in order to bridge the gap between what is known and practice. This could support an effective use of TAs as a mechanism in education system.

This chapter has provided information about the TA role in terms of the problematic nature of their name, of the characteristics of the deployment and employment of TAs. Despite the little information about this role, this chapter highlighted the issues that should be addressed by policy-makers and school in order to use the assistants more effectively. The TA role could be clarified and be used as a means both in student learning and school improvement. The following chapter will present the theoretical framework that will be used for the clarification of this role.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

This chapter encloses the background of activity theory and its main concepts, its application in organization studies and some of the criticisms that it has received. It, also, discloses how activity theory relates to this study by clarifying why it is relevant to the design and the purposes of this study. Last, it shows how activity system analysis is going to be used as a descriptive tool in order to investigate the role of the TAs and how development research work could facilitate the development of the TAs.

Activity Theory Background

This study will implement activity theory (AT) as a theoretical framework. Activity theory, which has attracted a global interest (Sannino et al. 2009; Peim, 2009), is a practice-based theory (Sannino et al. 2009) based on the work of many contributors through a long period of time. Some of them are Vygotsky, Letont'ev, Luria, Il'enkov, Core, Engeström Ritva, Wertch and Bakhtin (Engeström, 2001). Activity was seen as not only an abstract principle of explanation or a general theoretical notion but also as a concept that indicates the basic unit of human life (Sannino et al. 2009).

The three generations of research through which AT has been evolved (Engeström, 2001) are based on the mediated action, the object-oriented, collective activity and the activity systems interaction. The first generation is Vygotsky model of human activity influenced by Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). The second generation is based on the collective, object-oriented activity and the third generation is the activity networks. All three generations are related to Cultural Historical Activity Theory as a theoretical perspective used to approach human activity.

CHAT and Vygotsky model of human activity

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is a theoretical perspective within psychology that originates in the work of Vygotsky (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). It raises the societal, cultural and historical character of human mental functioning and activity, especially, after Letont'ev' s and Luria's later work (Roth and Lee, 2007). This perspective has influenced the models that represent human activity in all three generations of activity theory.

Vygotsky created the first model of human activity which was based on the concept of mediation (see Figure 1). The mediated action is a central concept in activity theory. It is used to explain the semiotic processes that take place during interactions with the use of tools and signs as mediating artifacts in a context and help individuals to understand better this context (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). 'The interactions in which individuals engage allow opportunities for mediated action that contribute to the social formation of their consciousness' (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p.16).
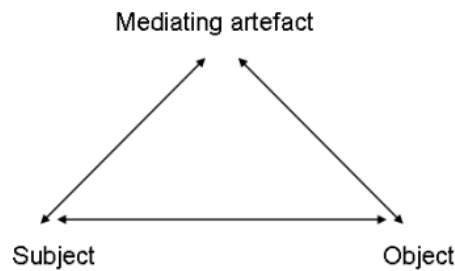
Figure 1 Vygotsky's basic mediated action triangle (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p.17)

This triangle represents the way in which Vygotsky perceives the mediated action as a path to explain the development of human consciousness in a non-dualistic way (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). In this schema the 'subject' is the individual(s) who is/ are engaged in the activity that occurs. The 'mediating artefact (tools)' is the artefacts, signs that are involved in subject's mediated action within the activity. Although there can be a case when it is difficult to distinguish a tool from a sign, a distinction between them is based on the object of the action, therefore, a tool usually mediates an object-oriented material action and the sign mediates social interaction. The 'object' is the goal of subject's activity that is pursued through mediated action. The activity represented by this triangle explains human activity as a process mediated by artifacts as technical tools and signs as psychological tools (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

Collective, object-oriented activity

A limitation of the first generation of activity theory was the focus on individuality (Roth & Lee, 2007; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Leont'ev worked on this limitation by defining the object-oriented activity in the second generation (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010, p.14). Mediated action remains a central concept of human activity but now it accounts for sociopolitical situations and the unit of analysis is the object-oriented activity (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The object oriented activities are the core of AT and distinguishes it from other theories (Sannino et al. 2009). Here, the object of the human activity is a collective project and is characterized by ambiguity, surprise, interpretation, sense making, and potential for change (Engeström, 2001).

This generation of activity theorists focused on the collective character of activity and the individual and collective actions which are embedded in collective activity systems (Engerström, 2001). The collective elements in an activity system are represented in Engeström's model (see Figure 2) through the elements of subject, object, mediating artefacts, community, rules and division of labour and their interactions with each other. The subject, the tools and the object represent the triangle of Vygotsky, and they function in the same way. The new elements that take into account the context are the rules, the community and the division of labour. The 'rules' refer to formal and informal regulations that affect the way in which activity takes place. 'Community' is the social group part of which is the subject while s/he is engaged in the activity. The 'division of labour' refers to the way in which the tasks that the members of the community ought to implement are distributed among them. Another concept that one can see in Engeström's model is the 'outcome' and it refers to the result of the activity (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). The activity is a means to a

systematic analysis of human interaction based on holistic engagement and complex interrelations between individuals and their community (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010; Engeström, 2001).
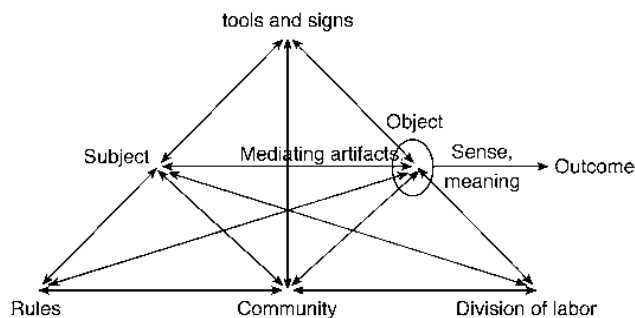

Figure 2 Engeström's structure of a human activity system (Engeström, 2001, p.135)

The context, on which this model focuses, provides the subject (s) with systemic contradictions that create tensions within a system. 'Tensions' is an important concept in activity system analysis although it is not presented in the triangle. According to Yamagata-Lynch (2010, p.23), 'These tensions arise when the conditions of an activity put the subject in contradictory situations that can preclude achieving the object or the nature of the subject's participation in the activity while trying to achieve the object.' Thus, their importance derives from the fact that they can affect subject ability to get to the object of the activity and they can affect the interactions that occur within the activity and the outcome of the activity. Tensions can also be created by changes that occur within the system and that affect future activities (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

The second generation of activity theory was developed around the collective and object-oriented human activity. The tool to understand and analyze the activity situated in a collective context is Engeström's model of activity system (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) which expands Vygotsky's model of human activity by introducing the 'rules', the 'community' and the 'division of labour' as main factors that affect human activity. Engeström (2001) lifts up the presence of contradictions and tensions within an activity system as driving forces of development. Therefore, activity system analysis is a method developed by Engeström Yrjö for analyzing human interactions with CHAT by identifying the human activity as a unit of analysis (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

Activity networks

Problems, however, have been identified in the literature regarding the second generation model, too. It was Michael Cole who referred to the limitation of this model on cultural diversity and dialogue between traditions and perspectives; a limitation in identifying interactions between and among activity systems (Engeström, 2001). This limitation, which dealt with by activity theorists (Wertch, Bakhtin and Engeström Ritva) and the third generation of Activity Theory model (Engeström, 2001) (see Figure 3), was overcome by the creation of activity networks and tools to understand the way in which different activity systems interact. It is the object which is seen as a potentially shared or jointly constructed object in such systems (Engeström, 2001, p.136). The third generation of activity theory takes under

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consideration the pluralism in human activity systems and their interactions, and lifts up activity systems analysis application in developmental research where the investigator often takes a participatory and interventionist role in the activity of the participants in order to help them experience change (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).
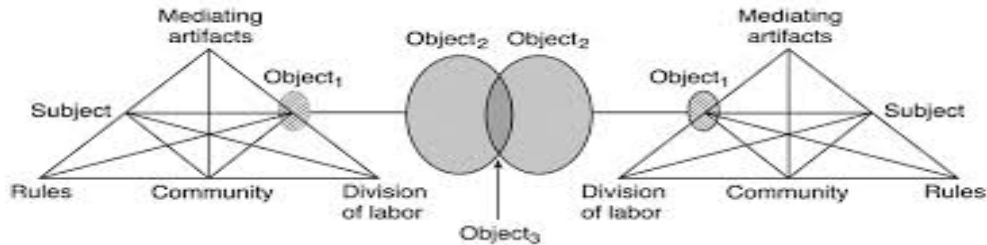

Figure 3 Two interacting activity systems as minimal model for the third generation of activity theory (Engeström, 2001, p.136)

In conclusion, the three generations are all based on mediating action of Vygotsky. Activity theory has been developed by many generations of activity theorists in order to overcome the problems that a generation had. Engeström (2001) summarizes all three generations; the first generation of activity theory is Vygotsky's identification of the mediated action triangle which focuses on the mediating artifacts such as technical tools and signs as psychological tools; the second generation of activity theory is attributed to A.N. Leontiev's work which emphasized the collective nature of human activity, along with Engeström's work in 1987 that developed the activity systems model as a tool to analyze human activity as a unit of analysis and the third generation focuses on the interaction between and among activity systems and it has been applied by Engeström in development research work as a means to transformation and change (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Activity theory has a generative potential across a wide range of disciplines and fields of social practice (Sannino et al. 2009) such as education/ learning, organizational studies, management and sociology.

Activity theory in organizational studies

Although activity theory remains a marginalized area of interest in the field of organizational studies that needs to be further understood (Sannino et al. 2009), it has attracted some attention. Roth and Lee (2007) refer to a few organizational and workplace theorists (Blackler, Crump, and McDonald, 2000; Morf and Weber, 2000; Thompson, 2004) who found much in CHAT relevant to their work. AT in organizational studies is used as a path of possible change and development.

An example of Engeström's theory in organizational studies is the 'Cleaning Project' (Sannino et al., 2009, p 263). This example was chosen because 'cleaners' is a group that shares a few characteristics with TAs. It is a group that is under-estimated in daily practice in terms of managers and clients and in terms of education, and it is a group that is neglected by research, too. The findings of the project produced two models of cleaning and a zone of proximal cleaning work was suggested.

To be more specific, the object of cleaning moved from 'home' to rationalized cleaning work. The outcome was an agreed-upon 'appropriate' level of cleanliness and a new vocabulary for understanding the cleaning work was designed and there were changes on behalf of cleaners' trainers. In this way, the subject of the activity system was changing and the difference between the potential mental development of

the cleaners within the context of their workplace and their previous cognitive ability before they were involved in a problem solving situation indicated the zone of proximal development of the subject. The zone of proximal development suggested a new subject in restructured division of labour with expanded competencies and tasks. Activity theory, therefore, seems to have a potential to evolve an organization by focusing on the object and subject and the way in which the context can contribute in subject education and transformation.

Criticisms

Activity theory is a theoretical framework difficult to understand and it has been criticized, mostly, regarding two issues. Firstly, AT has been criticized for its use as a theoretical framework. Another issue is the complexities in understanding and conducting activity systems analysis and the activity as a unit of analysis in research (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). These issues should be taken under consideration by this study.

To begin with, activity theory has been criticized for not following Vygotsky's cultural historical approach (Peim, 2009; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). In some countries, activity theory has been seen as an inadequate framework for identifying and understanding cultural and psychological phenomena because it has been used only for analyzing observable phenomena. This is an inadequate approach to understand cultural and psychological human development because only by analyzing signs' meanings one can understand them (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010).

As activity theory has been criticized for not following Vygotsky's legacy in understanding the cultural and psychological development of human beings, this study will attempt to approach mediated action through object-oriented activity in order to reveal individual and the environment's relationship. For this purpose, and according to Yamagata-Lynch (2010), the researcher needs to clarify how s/he defines the object-oriented activity and conceptualize it as a unit of analysis. Furthermore, according to Yamagata-Lynch (2010), the observable behavior will be the entry point to start developing an insider perspective as the researcher needs to reveal participants' cognitive processes, too. The methods that will be used for collecting data will focus on revealing such information as well as researcher's emic and etic perspective as participant-observer.

Activity system analysis has also been criticized as a tool for analyzing activity as a unit of analysis. Peim (2009) has criticized the model of activity theory of Engeström as it raises concerns about the activity system as the *prime* unit of analysis and the relations between the activity system – consisted of subject, tools, rules, community, artefact, division of labour and object as separable elements of the activity system that interrelate- and its context. Peim (2009) argues that although, the elements of the system are related to each other and they depend on the object, they cannot belong entirely or solely to the system. In this way the author questions the elements' existence inside and outside the system as they can belong to other systems too.

These issues are important for this study because they affect its conduct. The study will attempt not to use AT for merely describing a phenomenon, but, also, for highlighting the signs as the researcher will be part of participants. In addition, the criticism regarding the activity as the unit of human activity will be taken under consideration during the interpretation of the data.

TA role and activity system analysis

This qualitative study will use activity theory to investigate the role of the TAs as an organizational issue that needs identity. The TA role could be highlighted through an approach of the activity of the assistants and the factors that affect it. This study will also pursue the way in which TA role is used and the needs of this role in order to explore potential ways of developing the work of the assistants. AT, thus, was chosen as a theory, firstly, because it suits the qualitative nature of the study, secondly, because it can be used to produce a model of the activity of the TAs and, last, because it can point to the way in which an organization can change when the needs have been highlighted.

Design and purposes

Activity theory is suitable for this study as it investigates the complexities of real life (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) and it allows the researcher to lift up and present TA activity as the outcome of the interactions that occur within a specific context and they are forced by tensions and contradictions. Activity theory has been used in qualitative research (Hashim and Jones, 2007; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010), and it is suitable for case studies because activity systems analysis aims for the particularization as case studies do (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) and it does not generate generalizable results (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Nevertheless, Yamagata-Lynch (2010) suggests that the results could be applied in larger contexts if the researcher collaborates with other researchers and they use both quantitative and qualitative methods or/ and if researchers and practitioners repeat the implementation of the interventions in more than one setting in order to find whether there are common systemic implications or not.

Activity system analysis

This study will attempt to use activity system analysis in order to produce a model and to identify the use of the role and the needs that have to be overcome through changes in the workplace as the third generation suggests for organization development. The model of the TA activity within a specific context will emerge through the identification of patterns in objects, rules, mediators, community and division of labor. The activity system analysis has a descriptive character and it will be conducted by highlighting the object of the activity, for instance, assist whom, what kind of assistance, the mediation tools such as signs, language, tools, division of labor; i.e. cooperation with teachers, students, administrator or other TAs engaged in the activity and the community; i.e. the school, the teaching assistants. Instead of shadowing a TA, this study will synthesize the activity of the TAs by finding common responses in participants' answers with respect to the above elements of Engeström's model and make one model of TA activity.

This study will focus on the needs that the TA activity has and which could be overcome through the third generation model. The third generation model refers to developmental transformations which attempt to remediate the activity system and resolve the existing problems. These problems are the collective needs which are dictated by the object of the activity.

This chapter has shown the way in which activity theory will be used in this study in order to reach its objectives. The aim of the study shed light on the identity of the TA role and the way in which this role can be developed in an organization. This chapter has also described briefly why this theory is relevant to the nature of this study. The nature of the study will be further presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Methods and methodology

This chapter describes the nature of this study and the research design that is chosen as suitable for seeking the answers to the research questions. Firstly, there will be a description of the qualitative methodology that is selected as appropriate and, then, the qualitative research methods on which the research design is based will be presented. The chapter concludes with the trustworthiness and ethical considerations that could provide valid conclusions about the TA role.

Qualitative research methodology

The methodology is used in order to help the readers and/or the researchers understand the process of the scientific inquiry (Cohen et al., 2007) and it is embedded in the philosophical fundaments of the study. The questions that define the ontological and epistemological fundaments focus on the perception of the nature of the reality, and the nature of the knowledge and the relationship between the inquirer and the inquired-into respectively (Mertens, 2010).

To be more specific, the ontological perspective of this study lies on the premises of constructionism (Bryman, 2012; Mertens, 2010; Cohen et al., 2007; Hartas, 2009; Pring, 2004) because constructionism implies that social properties stem from people's interactions and they are not phenomena that are separated from those involved. The epistemological position that is used so that the knowledge from this dynamic social world is revealed is interpretivist (Bryman, 2012; Mertens, 2010; Cohen et al., 2007) because interpretivism attempts to understand the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants while the researcher interacts with them.

The philosophical perspectives of this study lead to a qualitative approach as suitable for the nature and purpose of this study. The naturalistic features of this study that make a qualitative methodology appropriate are the natural setting, people's interaction, the descriptive nature of data and its inductive character. To begin with, in qualitative, naturalistic studies the world is studied in its natural setting (Cohen et al., 2007; Arsenault and Anderson, 1998). The setting and the people are the data and the actions as they are understood within the context. In this setting people act deliberately and their actions make meanings through and in their activities (Cohen et al., 2007). The situations in which activities take place are fluid and they change which make events and behaviors (and thus activities) also change and be richly affected by the context. This makes the activities that take place 'situated' (Cohen et al., 2007) and these situations should be examined through the eyes of the participants rather than of the researcher (Cohen et al., 2007; Hartas, 2009). The descriptive character of the data refers to the in depth, thick descriptions which involve the subjectivity of the researcher in communicating them (Hartas, 2009). These descriptions are a mosaic made of the multiple interpretations and perspectives on a situation that is complex and multilayered (Cohen et al., 2007). Besides the thick descriptions, a qualitative study is value bounded, so the impact that the values might have should be taken into account when someone is conducting and reporting a research. Last, this study is inductive (Arsenault and Anderson, 1998; Bryman, 2012) but non generalizable -in terms of statistics- as a qualitative approach sees the uniqueness of an event and it is based on the inductive relationship between theory and research.

Although qualitative methodology is appropriate for the nature and the purposes of this study, there are also some disadvantages in its use. One disadvantage is the difficulty in establishing reliability and validity because of researcher's bias, which is difficult to be prevented or detected. One more disadvantage is the limited scope because of the in-depth approaches that are used for the data collection. The advantages and disadvantages of qualitative research in this and other educational research remind everyone of the difficulty in capturing and fully understand the world by using just one perspective in a research. This difficulty originates traditionally in the two opposite philosophical views regarding the nature of the world and the knowledge (Pring, 2004).

Qualitative research methods

The methods are "... the range of approaches used in educational research to gather data which are to be used as a basis for inference and interpretation, for explanation and prediction" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 47). The methodology that his study will employ is a qualitative approach and the research method is an ethnographic case study as it is a single in-depth study and has been chosen because it combines some of the characteristics of both ethnography and qualitative case study. The case study consists of semi- structured interviews, participant observations, documents and a reflexive journal. The research design is shown in Figure 4.
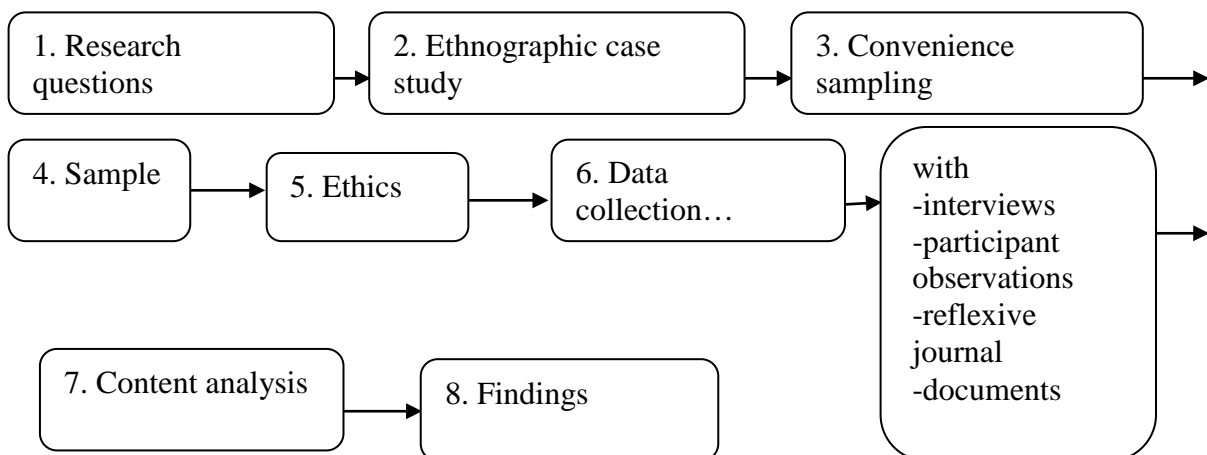
Figure 4 Research design model

Ethnography is used to investigate cultural phenomena and it aims to represent a vivid reconstruction (Cohen et al., 2007) of what the people of the group that is being studied do and say (Hammersley, 2006). This implies the involvement of the researcher – sometimes long-term- in order to understand the complexity of people's believes and to develop social relationships with the participants (Syrani, 2008). This involvement makes the researcher the primary research instrument and it can provide him/her with in depth information about participants' believes and activities. As Hitchcock and Hughes (1989) suggest, ethnographic research describes the activities that take place in a particular cultural context from the point of view of the members of that group and provides as much as possible of the 'insider's' knowledge. Another key feature of ethnographic research would be the collection of empirical data in a real-life setting mostly through participant observations, open-ended interviews and document analysis (Syrani, 2008). The use of various techniques for data collection

facilitates the cross-checking of the accuracy of the data. Last, ethnographic research provides the reader with a holistic description of the phenomenon that is being investigated (Cohen et al., 2007).

In addition to the characteristics of ethnography, the features of a case study are suitable for the purposes of this study as well. Case study attempts to answer 'how' and 'why' questions (Arsenault and Anderson, 1998) through participants' understandings about a specific event in its natural setting. The uniqueness of this study stems from the meanings that participants give to the case that is investigated (Pring, 2004). Case study is a method that is used to observe deeply the characteristics of an individual unit (Syrani, 2008; Pring, 2004) and to accommodate the perspectives of the individuals involved (Arsenault and Anderson, 1998; Cohen et al., 2007; Pring, 2004). The group of people and the unit under investigation cannot be understood separated from participants' understandings as it is the participants' understanding that is under investigation.

Yin (1994) argues that a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomena within their real life context (Pring, 2004), especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident. Real life situations tend to be complex, however, case study enables the understanding of complex inter-relationships and facilitates in depth understanding of the situation, and it also provides vivid and rich descriptions of events (Cohen et al., 2007). Case study is a holistic research method that involves many sources of evidence in order to describe and analyze a single phenomenon that usually occurs in its natural setting (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 161). The sources of data that this study will use are documents, open-ended interviews and participant observation, as typically case study research does in order to investigate in detail a case (Bryman, 2012), and a reflexive journal.

The limitations in using an ethnographic case study could be attributed more to the qualitative nature of ethnography and case study. One of the weaknesses of the employment of these methods is the focus on the complexity of a single phenomenon (or a few in the case of ethnography) (Syrani, 2008). It does not offer enough information to generalize (Syrani, 2008; Pring, 2004) but this limitation can be combated by, for example, the investigation of multiple cases that could generate patterns (Syrani, 2008). Another limitation is the subjective data that constrain the level of objectivity (Syrani, 2008; Pring, 2004). The subjectivity derives from the researcher as the primary instrument in data collection and participants' statements. Triangulation is a technique that is used for such cases (Syrani, 2008).

As the research proceeds there are some issues that this research design should address and clarify because the researcher is a novice and the design and implementation of a case study is challenging while its rigor is often questioned (Syrani, 2008). First of all, there should be a clear case and a clear unit of analysis so that the researcher can choose the right type of case study. Then the sampling strategy and the sample should be clear and in accordance with the limitations and the needs of this study and, then, the data collection and analysis would follow.

Case and unit of analysis
To begin with, a case study should have a clear purpose so that the researcher can start with clarifying the case and the kind of case study s/he is going to use. The selection of the case leads to the unit of analysis which is related directly to the issue or issues that are being investigated (Anderson and Arsenault, 1998). The case that

concerns this study is the TA role in terms of deployment and employment and as it examines a number of cases jointly in order to understand a general condition, the most suitable type would be the collective case study (Stake, 1996; Yin, 1984). The unit of analysis derives from the theoretical framework and it is the TA activity. The unit of analysis is selected based on the research purpose, questions and theoretical framework but it can be constrained by the accessibility for the data collection. The unit of analysis could have a clear target because there is a clear focus on human actions and relationships in relation to the context from both the activity theory as theoretical framework and the case study as research method. Moreover, the accessibility was not a challenging issue because the researcher had already created a network because of her employment in the school that the research takes place.

Sampling

The strategy selected for sampling is convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is "…the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size has been obtained or those who happen to be available and accessible at the time" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 113-114). The size of the sample is small because of the time line that had to be followed and because of the amount of qualitative data that would make more difficult to understand in depth a complex situation.

Sample

The school from which the sample was selected is a publicly funded 'friskola'. It is an English speaking independent school that functions under the Swedish law and school inspections and it is placed in the city of Gothenburg. The school is open from 7:30 to 17:30 and includes pre-school classes (three-four years old), two reception classes (five years old), two infant classes (six years old), two year one – three classes and year four-nine classes while there is also the possibility to attend recreational (fritids) program from 7:30 to 8:30 and from 14:00 to 17:30. The school could be characterized as multicultural as the students' families come from various countries from different parts of the world. The process to get access to the school included the distribution of an explanatory statement (see Appendix 2) and the permission letter (see Appendix 3) that was signed by the head of the administration.

The participants of this research are three TAs, three teachers and the assistant principal of the school. One of the TAs works at the infant class and the other two TAs work at years one, two and three (at both classes of each year group). The teachers teach at the infant class, year two and three. The aim was to follow the TAs and observe their activity at the first years of the compulsory school (grundskola). Their response was in some cases more than positive which made the implementation of this study easier and their input was more than valuable. The participant demographics are presented in the following Table.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participants	Education	Work experience
TA, J.	Bachelor and Master degrees in the area of Media, teacher qualification in Sweden	Journalist, fritids assistant, TA

TA, B.	Nurse education	Nurse, 18 years TA
TA, K.	Psychology courses	No work experience in school, fritids assistant, TA
T, P.	Bachelor degree in sociology, Teacher education in Sweden	Fritids assistant, teacher
T, N.	Teacher education	2 years as teacher, 7 years as TA
T, F.	Teacher diploma	20+ years teaching
A.P., J.	Teacher education, human resources and facility management training	20 years teacher, some years assistant principal, head of administration

Data collection

The next step of this research design was the selection of the methodological tools for data collection. Interviews and participant observations are chosen for the collection of the data from the sample described above. The tools are described in the following section.

Interviews

Interview is a valuable tool to case studies (Bryman, 2012) and is used as the prime source of the case study data because, firstly, it can provide the researcher with greater depth of understanding of the issues and, secondly, it identifies key informants who are part of the case and can share insider's knowledge. According to Kvale (1996), interview reveals the knowledge as generated between humans, often through conversations and this case study approaches knowledge as something constructed, therefore, interview is a suitable tool.

According to Kvale (2007) there are seven stages for planning, conducting and reporting interviews. These stages are presented in the Table 2.

Table 2
Kvale's Seven Stages of Interview

- *Thematizing*.

Formulate the purpose of an investigation and the conception of the theme to be investigated before the interviews start. The *why* and *what* of the investigation should be clarified before the question of how – method – is posed.

- *Designing*.

Plan the design of the study, taking into consideration all seven stages of the investigation, before interviewing. Designing the study is undertaken with regard to obtaining the intended *knowledge* and taking into account the *moral* implications of the study.

- *Interviewing*.

Conduct the interviews based on an interview guide and with a reflective approach to the knowledge sought and the interpersonal relation of the interview situation.

- *Transcribing*.

Prepare the interview material for analysis, which generally includes a transcription from oral speech to written text.

- *Analyzing*.

Decide, on the basis of the purpose and topic of the investigation, and of the nature of the interview material, which modes of analysis are appropriate for the interviews.

- *Verifying*.

Ascertain the validity, reliability and generalizability of the interview findings. Reliability refers to how consistent the results are, and validity means whether an interview study investigates what is intended to be investigated.

- *Reporting*.

Communicate the findings of the study and the methods applied in a form that lives up to scientific criteria, takes the ethical aspects of the investigation into consideration and that results in a readable product.

(Kvale, 2007)

The first stage provides answers to the 'why' question by clarifying the purpose of the study and hence the purpose of the interviews. The purpose of this study is to map the TA role; i.e. the TA activity itself and the use of the TAs. The second stage refers to the design of the interviews. The interviews were designed as semi-structured and were conducted with three TAs, three teachers and the assistant principal. The questions were not formulated as yes/no, close-ended questions but instead as open – ended questions. They were also based on the theoretical framework and the information gathered through the literature review. Participants had been informed that the transcripts are open to look and maybe change or add/remove some of the information that they shared. The interview questions (see Appendix 4) were piloted with the cooperation of a TA who is working at the same school, but she is not participating in this study and then they were distributed to the interviewees before the interviews. The interviews took place at the school during or after school time, lasted between 30-45 minutes and were phone-recorded. One of the interviews was conducted with two teachers. The interviews were not transcribed verbatim from the begging until the end, instead what was important for the purposes of the study was transcribed verbatim and was sent to the interviewees in order to remove or/ and add any piece of information. The stages of interview of Kvale were employed in order to add validity in the interviews that were conducted. Reliability issues were also addressed and hence there were no changes in wording, context or emphasis during the period of interviews, although there were a few different questions based on the group of participants because there was information that only some of them would have and could share. Finally, the findings were part of the data analysis of this study and they are presented in the next chapter.

In conclusion, interview approach was chosen because of the qualitative approach of this study, the inter-view (insider's perspective) that can enrich the data and conclusions, and the centrality of human interaction and the emphasis on social situatedness of data (Kvale, 1996). Furthermore, the practical value of the interviews

is to provide information from behalf of the informants about an existing and widely (under-)used role that is part of schools and education system and which lacks job description and clarification as a mechanism in school. Nevertheless, an interview raises issues such as ethical; informed consent (see Appendix 1), confidentiality, and the consequences of the interviews (Kvale, 1996) and issues about the formulation of the questions because by making the purpose of questions less obvious, the indirect approach is more likely to produce open answers while indirect questions might be interpreted in a different way by interviewee (Tuckman, 1972).

Observation

Another important method in qualitative research is observation. During observations, the researcher has an opportunity to gather 'live' data from 'live' situations (Cohen et. al., 2007). Such method can be combined with interviews and enrich the data as people might not feel comfortable to share all pieces of information during an interview. There are different types of observation (Mertens, 2010; Cohen et al. 2007). Here, the 'participant- as- observer' type was selected for the observation of the TAs, because, as its name suggests, the researcher is part of the participants, and therefore, engages in the same activities like the participants do and documents for research purposes what is happening. This type of observation is a little reactive technique that can provide the researcher with non-verbal data and informal relationships.

The LeCompte and Preissle's (1993) questions (see Appendix 5) were used in order to record and organize the data from the observations which lasted for two weeks. During the first week, the observations took place in infant classes and lasted for 30' during which the morning courses were observed. During the second week, the observations lasted for 30' minutes and took place at the classes where the assistants were working. Observations attempted to raise the signs that exist inside the actions in order to approach the mediated action of the TA activity. As soon as the observation was over I was writing down notes, with a focus on the patterns and critical events -if had happened any. The procedure of data collection, when using case study, is an ongoing process that follows a contemporary phenomenon. Therefore, there was often a need to alter opportunities to collect data. For instance, the flexible schedule that TAs have provided the researcher with various, unscheduled opportunities to collect data. More specifically, as it is not common for the TAs to have a stable schedule, the researcher had to follow them during the observations in different classrooms pursuing unscheduled tasks. Last, further considerations of researcher's subjectivity and the reaction of the participants to her presence were, also, taken under consideration.

The procedure of data collection was completed within a period of four weeks when adequate information about the purposes of this study was collected, for example, when more information started to become irrelevant to the purpose of the study. The data collected through the interviews, the observations, the reflexive journal and the documents were organized in order to be used for data analysis, and also member check. Thus, data were organized not only to facilitate the data analysis but also to allow another person to find the same (or not) patterns. The organization of the data took place in a respectful way towards participants in terms of their feelings, values and opinions.

Data analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis should commence at the same time or soon after the data collection process in order to organize data, make sense of them in terms of the definitions of the participants and note patterns. Then, the huge amounts of data can be organized more easily. The data analysis pursues thick descriptions and patterns. Inductive content analysis will be used to process information in terms of categories in a systematic and replicable manner (Bryman, 2012). Of course, the form of data (texts) supports verification through reanalysis and replication.

According to Cohen et al. (2007, p.476), the first step towards content analysis is to define the research questions to be addressed. In this study, questions with respect to the TA role and, more specifically, related to the factors that activity theory model includes regarding the context, for example, division of labor, mediating tools, and the way in which this role has been used by policy and school will be addressed. The second step is to define the population from which units of text are to be sampled, for example, interview transcripts, field notes during observations, official documents and reflexive journal. Then, there must be applied a sampling strategy for instance, random sampling, convenience sampling, domain sampling, cluster sampling, purposive, systematic, time sampling, snowball. The fourth step includes the context of the generation of the document; i.e. place, people involved, where the documents come from, way of recording the data, etc. Then the unit of analysis is defined and, here, the thematic unit of analysis is suggested. Then, the codes are used in the analysis, and the construction of the categories for analysis follows; in this case the categories will be TAs, policy/ school, teachers and professional development. After the coding and categorizing, the researcher is able to interpret the data and proceed to the summary and speculative inferences.

Trustworthiness

The issues of trustworthiness and validity are vital parts of a research design and, hence, there should be a clear description of the way they were addressed. These issues are related to the limitations that should be taken into account when a researcher is engaged in case studies. These limitations are the biased findings, generalizability – which concerns validity- and reliability.

Validity in a qualitative research is related to honesty, depth, researchers' objectivity, triangulation and richness of the data (Syrani, 2008; Cohen et al., 2007). Validity can be organized in internal and external validity. Internal validity shows that the explanation of a situation that the researcher has given can be sustained by the data collected (Cohen et al., 2007). For this purpose, the data gathered have to be revised and checked by peers and members (Mertens, 2010). Although a common criticism on case studies is the not easy cross-checking of the inquiry which leads to selective and biased findings, case studies can provide a chain-of-evidence; a tight interconnected path of evidence (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998) that can facilitate member-check and peer review. The external validity or generalizability – or, also, transferability as most common in qualitative research (Mertens, 2010) - is difficult to be achieved by a case study as it is about the investigation of a single case. According to Anderson & Arsenault (1998), the external validity of a case study could depend on the whether the case or the phenomenon involved is typical or not. Ethnographers, however, who seek regularities and patterns in people's behavior and practice address the issue of generalizability as 'comparability', i.e. the ethnographer present explicit

characteristics of the group in order to be used for comparisons and 'translatability', i.e. the in-depth description of explicit analytic categories that can be compared to other categories generated by other cases (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 169). Thus, a level of generalizabilty is possible only if readers/ researchers can find other cases on which case studies findings or conclusions could be applied.

The other issue that this study attempts to address is reliability. Reliability is a matter of a fit between the researchers' record of evidence and what actually took place in the natural setting. This fit allows another researcher to interpret the data in the same way (Cohen et al., 2007). In qualitative research, such as this study, reliability can be seen as stability (Mertens, 2010) of observations, parallel forms over time and, as, inter-rater reliability. The researcher can provide a level of reliability in the case study by using a data base that incorporates data collected through/ from many sources and not just, for instance, from a set of interviews.

Stake (2005) argues that triangulation is a process that clarifies the meaning through the use of multiple perceptions and that verifies the repeatability of what is interpreted or observed. Triangulation technique can enhance both the validity and reliability of a research and is a useful tool when a researcher is engaged in a case study (Cohen et al., 2007). In this study validity and reliability are supported by methodological triangulation by using different methods and different methodological tools (Cohen et al., 2007; Mertens, 2010). Different sources were also used, for example, the interviews that took place were conducted not only with teachers, but also with the TAs and the assistant principal as this can provide consistency of evidence across sources of data (Mertens, 2010).

Ethical considerations

Ethics is an important part of the research. Although it does not involve sensitive groups such as children, ethical considerations are vital because it is a matter of respect (Silverman, 2010). The above research plan is based on participants' informed consent and voluntary participation, as they were aware of their right to withdraw any time they want (Syrani, 2008; Silverman, 2010). As the Swedish ethics standards indicate (The Swedish Research Council, 2011) the researcher has maintained confidentiality and anonymity of participants' information (Syrani, 2008; Silverman, 2010).

This chapter has provided information about the relevance of the methodology to the aim of this study. The in depth investigation of an under-researched role can shed light on the way that it functions now, and the findings of the case study can facilitate a large scale study regarding this role. The following chapter will present the findings of this study.

Chapter 5: Findings and discussion

This chapter presents the findings of the study as they were generated by the analysis of the data. The data that describe the TA role were organized in five themes. The themes are the different understanding about the TA role and title, the activity of the TAs, their professional development, the relationships between the teachers and the TA and, last, the employment of the TAs.

Different understanding about the role and titles

Literature review highlighted the plethora of the names that are used to refer to the role of the assistants. They vary not only in a broad context, among the countries that include this job position in their education systems (Balshaw and Farrell, 2002), but also, as this study shows, at local level, within a school. The participants used various titles to refer to the TAs and various factors that could determine each title. The plurality in the names led to small debates that concluded to the titles as being interchangeable and a linguistic problem because the tasks that the TAs have are similar regardless of the name they have. Nevertheless, the title should not be disregarded as it can be misleading for the employment of the TAs.

During the interviews there were many names that were used when we were talking about the TA role but we were confident that we were talking about the same role. The title that is employed for the assistants seems to be negotiable and determined by the members of a community who although might use different names they refer to the same person. The findings of this study, therefore, present a role which the participants described without referring to it with the same name.

The participants used eight different names as the dominant name in the school which is ironic as eventually there was not just one name. Teaching assistant, learning assistant, classroom support, help, classroom assistants, assistants, teacher assistants, student assistants are the names that participants used as the title that the TAs have in their school.

What is interesting is that not all the participants were confident about their answer and when they were asked if the title they mentioned reflects the tasks that the TAs have, they were not confident either. For example:

> I think so. I think if it says teaching assistant reflects what we do… we assist the teacher with everything (TA, K.)

> well sometimes… the teaching assistant means that you actually assisting the teacher, making her job easier .. doing things that she hasn't time to do and sometimes, like doing reading with the children, things you can help with or helping in a lesson or something. (TA, B.)

> yeah I think so. I always have to.. any help I get I have to very much guide them into what they have to do (T, P.)

Two of them justified the title by themselves by relating it to the tasks of the TAs and the frequency of their presence in the classroom. The latter of the following would not only be related to the name of the TAs but it would also indicate the way in which the school is using this role as it seems that there is not a TA regularly in older than infant classes. More specifically assistant principal J. and teacher F. said that:

I think that there are different types of assistants and they are used of course in many different ways but from my point of view I'd say that there are teacher assistants and student assistants that would be my way of splitting different tasks out and by saying that I mean that teacher assistant is connecting more to the whole class and the classroom and the tasks are set by the teachers and then the student assistant is usually working with a student with special needs or maybe behavior issues and is more connecting to a student or a group of students. (A.P. J.)

We tend not to refer to them as TAs, although that's what they are, we tend to just call them classroom support or help because you have one all the time… as you move up the school it's a bit more sporadic, you have somebody for this lesson but you don't have someone for the next lesson (T, F.)

The reflection on the title of the TAs and the justification of the choice led to debates on the name of the assistants, especially, during the interview with the two teachers, as it was mentioned in the literature (Warhurst et al., 2014; Farrell et al., 2010; Takala, 2007; Kerry, 2005). The debate would provide insights about the more suitable title relating to the tasks that the TA has, however, the discussion concluded with the title as a linguistic issue because the TAs, whatever title they have, would share the same tasks. According to the teachers N. and F.,

I think classroom assistants might be used as a broader term, teaching assistant is quite specific in relation to the teaching … but the thing is that if you are working in the classroom then the term is interchangeable, because if you are a classroom assistant you are also a teaching assistant because if you are not teaching in the classroom then what are you doing? So it's linguistics, it doesn't matter how they are called. […] I think the title is quite irrelevant, you can call them teaching assistants, classroom assistant…. (T, N.)

…in terms of what they actually do when we do have them, then it's the same idea. They are not used being out cutting paper or doing things like that. They are working with the children. They are doing a teaching role (T. F.)

Furthermore, according to the data collected through the observations and the interviews, the title of the TAs is not an object of debate within the classroom as the teachers have asked the children to call them by their surname like they call the teacher. For instance, the teachers N. and F. explain:

…the minute they [the TAs] are in the classroom my children are calling them by their surname and I insist on that (T, N.)

this is how we are called by our surnames … and I think that it raises the status too... they see them as… adults working with them (T, F.)

Nevertheless, it would not be wise to disregard the title just because the tasks are the same or because it is not an obstacle in everyday communication between the teacher and the TA, as the names send out a message to teachers, parents and

authority (McVittie, 2005), and a job position without a job description (Butt and Lance, 2009) and clear title could be misleading especially, for the employee. An example comes from the following quotation where the teacher P. describes two different job positions with different titles, payment conditions and qualifications but the same tasks.

> B only does reading, but then M will do reading or be in the classroom or make the resources nobody else helps me with that …well, M is not (a classroom assistant) because she is a trainee teacher.. but I suppose she is in the class as the assistant because she is here to gain experience but she is a trainee teacher who is unpaid ... that's interesting as well (T, P.)

Another example comes from the assistant principal J. who refers to the misunderstanding of the title and the role:

> …this can be misleading because many of our assistants are very qualified and maybe end up doing the wrong things possibly

To conclude, the title provokes debates and it is an issue that concerns more the employment of the TAs and policy makers than the everyday activity as regardless of the title their tasks seem to be the same. The fact that the trainee and the TA who have different qualifications might result having the same tasks raises questions both about the effectiveness of the TAs in their tasks and the need for further training because not all the TAs have TA or teaching training, and about the policy of the school to hire qualified staff for job positions who have no qualification requirements. Both issues will be discussed later but, before we proceed, it is the tasks of the TAs that should be clarified.

TA activity

According to Activity System Analysis, the TA activity consists of the subject, the object (ive), the mediating artefacts/ means, the rules and norms, the community and the division of labour (Engeström, 2001, p.135). The objects of this activity cover a wide range of assistance that TAs can provide within a school (Takala, 2007) while the means, the rules, the community and the division of labour are school based parameters that affect the activity.

The object of the activity of the TAs can be organized into two broad groups depending on the nature of the tasks (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Kerry, 2005). One group would be related to direct involvement in teaching and learning processes (see Table 3). According to the Table 3 and as it is mentioned in literature, TAs have been used in support for students without SEN (Ferguson, 2014) and they have been used in the ways displayed in order to support differentiation in the classroom. As the teacher P. and other teachers that I met during the observations said

> well we share M […] because she [the other class teacher of the same year group] needs to differentiate more (T P.)

Table 3
Learning and Teaching Processes

Learning and teaching processes			
Reading			
Support	In English	In mathematics	In topic
Answering students' questions			
Work with group(s) with difficulties	In English	In mathematics	
Work with groups that work independently			
Teaching/ substitute teachers			

The other group would include more practical and social tasks (see Table 4) which are mentioned in literature as well (Ferguson, 2014; Harris and Aprile, 2015; Ward, 2011; McVittie, 2005). According to the participants and the data collected through observations, the objectives of the activity of the assistants were repetitive and in common in the classes, especially in the two younger classes (infant classes) and they could be categorized into three groups, as the assistant principal said:

> ...but from my point of view I would divide them (tasks) from being practical, social and pedagogy (A.P. J.)

Table 4
Practical and Social Tasks

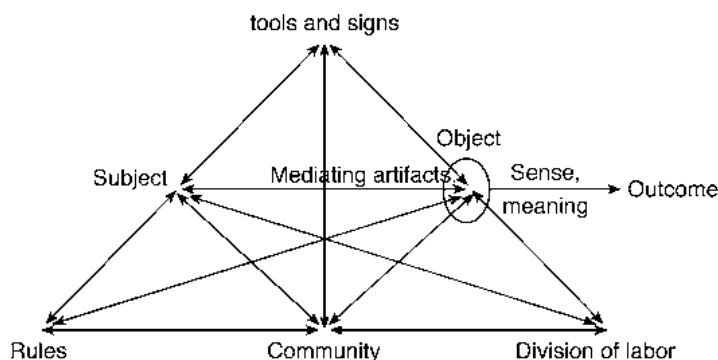| Practical	Social
Photocopying	Conflicts
Check missing homework	Social problems
Preparation	
Clean tables	
Laminating	
Make sure that the children are settled and paying attention	
Sort through the readers	

Figure 5 Engeström's structure of a human activity system

The means that the TAs use in their activity, and they belong to the top of Engeström's structure of human activity system (see Figure 5) are mostly materials and resources in the classroom and they are provided by the teacher. What is interesting is that although the TAs and the trainee teachers share some tasks, only the trainee teachers have flexibility in choosing the resources they are using, probably because as the TA B. said:

> they (teachers) will help us, because we are obviously not
> qualified teachers so they usually say... I will say how should
> I do this or … and they tell you

There are not just technical tools, as some of them are also used as signs, for example, when the teacher distributes the I-pads to the students, the TA knows that s/he will supervise the students and s/he might need to use them if the child has difficulties in using it.

The teachers are not only responsible for the material provision but they also set the rules that regulate the activity of the assistants in forms of norms. For example, they usually inform the TAs about both the lessons' and the TAs' objectives before the lesson starts and at the time that the students enter the classroom. The TA should not sit and look at the teacher while s/he is teaching but do something else. However, this is more possible to happen if the TA is regularly in the classroom and knows what things need to be done while the children are paying attention to the teacher or if there is no need to be with a child that gets distracted easily and the TA should make sure that s/he is paying attention. Other norms include the obligation of the assistants to go to different classes –if s/he is not assigned to one- and ask who is in more need of help and join that class. This is not an official rule and usually is up to the personality of the TA but the A.P. J. encourages the TAs to do so probably because it is thought as an effective way to utilize the TA when there is a shortage.

Cooperation and, more specifically, division of labour is a vital part of human activity in Engeström's model (see figure 5) as well. The TAs usually cooperate with the class teacher or with two teachers, with other TAs, or the mentor of the group. According to the T N., "I would swap around so that I won't have my TA just working with one particular group. She might work with the children that might need pushing and I might work with the kids that need support and they [TAs] might work with the kids that work independently". That kind of cooperation can be facilitated by both verbal and non-verbal communication. The latter depends on the personality of the adults and the norms that have been developed through the daily cooperation.

Last part of Engeström's model is the community in which the subject belongs. In this case the TAs are part of two communities. They are part of the fritids staff and they are also working as teaching assistants. The line between the two communities to which the TAs belong affects their activity because it usually creates obstacles to the communication between the teacher and the TA. The employee is working in two job positions and, thus, they usually do not have time to communicate.

The activity of the TAs consists of the elements mentioned above but what is important for the activity is also the place where it occurs. TA activity takes place in duty breaks where they are usually called to solve a conflict or other problems, school trips, gym, nature walks but mostly in the classroom. As the teacher N. said,

> it's in the classroom 90% of the time or outside the classroom focusing on teaching tasks

One more characteristic of the TA activity is that it does not take place every day in all classes that were part of this study. For example, only the younger classes that participated had a TA everyday and their tasks were identical. The older classes did not have one every day because, first of all, it is the principal who decides if a class needs a TA. Another factor that determines whether a TA should be in a classroom is the schedule, for example, "some TAs walk students to the sportshall so it could be practical things like that as well of course and it's a matter of supervision" (A.P.J.). Moreover, the regularity of the activity of the TAs depends on the available funding and it is also based on the need to have people working in the morning (7.30 – 8.30) fritids programme, which means that there might be a TA in older classes just because s/he was needed for one hour in the morning.

In conclusion, the activity as presented above might concern the teachers and the administration. The administration could review easier the tasks of the assistants and work on their development. The teachers could solve the problems in time and communication that the participation of the TAs in two communities create by long term planning or an alternative management of the TAs.

TA professional development

The TA professional development has been highlighted in literature mostly in relation to the ineffectiveness of a TA to fulfill the tasks (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Kerry, 2005; Takala, 2007). According to the data, the professional development of the assistants could be related both to the in-service training that the TAs would need based on their workload, and to their personal development in the work field.

TA professional development could be linked to the qualifications of the assistants in relation to their tasks, as the relationship between these two implies the level of need for further training. According to the data, there is a variety in participants' perceptions about the TA qualifications and whether they are enough for the requirements of this job position or not. The way in which the participants perceive whether the qualification that the assistants have are adequate for their tasks or not could reflect their different roles in the school. The plurality in their perspectives about this issue can provide the study with a holistic view.

The job position that this study explores has no qualification requirements which is mentioned both by the assistants, for example, 'there isn't any qualification for the TAs' (TA, B.), and in the job description given by the union Kommunal. Although there are no qualification requirements, the school management recruits

qualified TAs; i.e. people that have completed higher level education in the field of social sciences or similar. The inadequacy of the qualifications of the TAs in fulfilling their tasks is an issue that, according to the assistant principal, needs to be addressed by the teachers and the TAs through regular meetings. However, the TAs and teachers' meetings that the management suggests lift up other issues regarding TAs' management and teachers' time which are, also, discussed later:

> We are lucky to have so well-qualified TAs […] but what we need is some kind of follow up. I think absolutely that the teachers can meet with the TAs on a more regular basis (A.P. J.)

The different viewpoints with respect to the qualifications of the assistants could be organized into two groups. On one hand, some of the participants see the educational background of the TAs and their studies at the university as relevant and helpful in fulfilling their tasks, for example,

> I think my education in psychology helped me (TA, K).

> I think that the learning aspect is (TA, J).

> They can still adapt to the situation, with the actual core skills that they've got (T, N.)

On the other hand, while the various educational backgrounds that the TAs have could support their work, their tasks vary as well. Therefore, it is questionable if they have the respective knowledge to fulfill all the tasks or in all year groups. This reflects the overall inefficiency that Harris and Aprile (2015) were arguing. An example of this situation comes from year 2:

> … we were doing science experiment and because maybe they don't have the same training …I was posing questions to children […] but then it is an awkward situation if it is not somebody who is trained in it then […]she was kind of like you saw standing there thinking what should I do…. (T, F.)

> I don't think that it's disrespect to anyone who comes to help me but I don't think that the majority of the people who've come to help us in y3 or y2 have qualifications related to teaching or education (T, F.)

Therefore, participants argue both that qualified TAs can adapt to the situation, and that TA qualifications are not always relevant to the tasks and they might be an obstacle in learning and teaching processes (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Farrell et al., 2010). Since there is no qualification requirement for this job position, the issues that are highlighted with respect to the TA qualification could be addressed by the further training of the TAs based on their tasks.

Data indicate a need for further training as, according to the TAs, a course that is child related and which could be in forms of brief and concise courses or training based on a general programme would enhance their competences, for example:

> … like a standard pedagogical course […] not necessary but I think it would help a lot with some TAs like myself who don't have so much education in teaching […] a class in something more child related would help (TA, K.)

> I think that it would be good if we had some training (TA, B.)

> … just a little boost course for a couple of days just to say and a general one that I think that could be good is a teaching assistance course (TA, J.)

Teachers also agree with TAs on training and they see it as a means of the effectiveness of the TAs. This training would be related to work with children, conflict resolution, teaching methods and pedagogy; areas that mirror the tasks of the TAs that were mentioned earlier - social, practical, teaching/ pedagogical. The following quotes reflect the perspectives of the teachers regarding the need for further training of the TAs:

> It would be more effective if I think back to my teacher training course, perhaps a more basic version of it, how to deal with conflicts, what methods work for teaching, pedagogy […] yeah I think training is always good (T, P.)

> If they had some training of working with children and possibly… (T, F.)

Although, TA training is needed, it is constrained by a few obstacles. Firstly, according to the TA B., 'it is a financial thing that they cannot afford to train us'. This obstacle could be overcome with the suggestion of the assistant principal about in-house training:

> A peer training or mentor training but I also think that we could have an introductory programme or follow up meeting… so both the meeting with the teacher and the TA, a TAs' meeting and also supplementary training would benefit TAs, the school and the students

The second obstacle in TA training is the absence of a TA course. The need of TA training lifted up the issue of a training course for the TAs. The need for further training is not irrelevant to the absence of a course because if there was one there would not be this need but what it also indicates is the role that the TAs have in Swedish education system:

> I think there isn't a assistant course in Sweden. I don't think that it is a recognized thing in Sweden (T, P.)

> I don't think that there is a course available for them to do here (T, F.)

If there was a course and, therefore, TAs training was 'a recognized thing in Sweden' (T P.) that would imply an attempt not only towards the effectiveness of the TAs but also towards a different, more focused use of the TA role. As there is no clear policy about the TA role and training, what emerged as a main factor of their training is their motivation and will for personal development. The personal motivation, though, that the TAs have for training vary and the broader picture could present the majority of the TAs as willing to further their education and even change their role, for instance:

> I think some people really want to further their education like in my case I had no idea that I would like working with kids as much as I do (TA, K.)

set myself a target and then when I go there I get really restless I suppose….. I love the actual process of learning (TA, J.)

If it is for you and if you like it you can be educated to become a teacher then I think that's a path that a TA would want to take but then not everybody wants responsibility and it's a huge workload as well. But I wasn't satisfied as being a TA, I wanted more (T, P.)

The teacher quoted last has been working as a TA before her teacher education programme and she shares the same motivation with TA J. who is taking a teacher education programme as well and TA K. who is thinking of taking a teacher training course. The ambitions of the TAs to further their education and change their role are also mirrored in principal's view:

I think we have extremely ambitious TAs […] but yes I think they would jump into the occasion to have in house training. I would guess that we would lose most of them into going into teaching careers instead

The fact that not only the teacher and the TA share the same view and motivation, but also that this view is in similar to the assistant principal's indicate a pattern that is reproduced for several years in this school. To be more specific, the teacher P. has been working in this school as a TA for some years then she attended a teacher education programme in Sweden and now she has been working as a teacher for several years. This is the professional development to which the TAs are aiming according to the interview data.

In conclusion, all the participants point to TA training as needed but there is no course available for the TAs to attend. What is also important is that the further training of the TAs in order to be more effective depends on their personal motivation. Last but not least, most of the TAs in this school are ambitious enough to pursue further education in teaching profession.

Teachers and TA relationships and working conditions

The role of the teachers is vital in exploring the TA role both because the role of the TAs has an impact on teacher workload and because the teachers and the TAs cooperate closely. Training and a shift of the traditional roles of the assistants have a positive impact on teacher workload and job satisfaction as well as a change in role boundaries between the teachers and the TAs (Butt and Lance, 2009; Farrell et al., 2010). The boundaries are challenged often as the teachers and the TAs work closely. The teachers cooperate with the TAs during the teaching and therefore issues of communication and boundaries need to be addressed often as the TA role is not clarified.

Literature (Butt and Lance, 2009; Farrell et al., 2010) linked the TAs to teacher workload, therefore, it is sensible to explore the cooperation of the teachers and the TAs by starting with teacher working conditions. Although, there are different perspectives on the working conditions of the teachers as the participants were not only teachers or only TAs, all the participants highlighted the various tasks that the teachers have. What is interesting is that even though teacher working hours are 45 per week and they are distributed in 35 hours at school and 10 hours at home,

sometimes they work more, especially the teachers in the junior school. The teachers described their job as not one of those that someone comes at 8.15 and leaves at 15.00 because of the workload. The reasons for the workload vary. Planning would be one of them and then marking, preparation, be available to parents and make worksheets. Other reasons would be answering to parent e-mails, commenting for the talks with the parents, children targets, resources and documentation on children's abilities and the level they have reached, the children who are at risk of not reaching the goals. Literature indicated that TAs can reduce teacher workload. According to two teachers, TAs are not reducing their workload and one said that they do reduce it. The teachers who said that the TAs do not reduce their workload with the tasks they have now consist two different cases. One of them has a TA everyday and they have developed great communication and cooperation and the reason for not reducing the workload is that:

> They are there to help the children, not marking, not
> preparing. They reduce the stress in the classroom (T, N.)

The other teacher does not have a TA every day and she is a team leader and the workload is increased because of this job position's responsibilities as well. The third teacher said that the TA reduces the workload, but she does not have a TA in the classroom every day either. Therefore, one could argue that the negative and the positive answers could refer to the cases that they had/have a TA, which would also imply that even if the TAs did reduce teacher workload with the current tasks, it would not make a difference to them because they do not have one every day. What is not clear in the third teacher's case is whether the positive answer is attributed to the support with which the trainee teacher provides her or the TA. Although the question during the interview was about the TAs and she made clear that trainee is not an assistant, she said that they both share some tasks and that she is working more with the trainee.

The perspectives of the teachers about the ways in which the TAs reduce teacher workload or not are in conjunction with their viewpoint about the potential use of the TAs as a means to actually reduce it. The teachers who said that the TAs do not reduce their workload believe that there is no way in which the TAs could reduce it because what the TAs can do to help is to work on communication and clear directions, as:

> ultimately you want to know where the children are […]a lot
> of the work that takes time I do after school (T, F.)

The teacher who said that the TAs reduce teacher workload believes that the way in which the TAs do reduce it is when they get to know the children and they are aware of the objectives because then the TAs would be able to analyze and help. The data point to a relationship in which the TAs would not reduce teacher workload under the current conditions as other studies have indicated.

Despite the impact that the TA role has on teacher workload, the teachers and the TAs cooperate during the teaching process. This cooperation brings up issues of communication and boundaries. The teachers highlighted the practices which could facilitate these issues (see Table 5) which concern decisions made by management, regarding the use of the TA role and policy – makers, and practices with respect to the teachers and TAs' cooperation and the tasks that the TAs have.

Table 5
Practices for Teachers and TAs' Communication

Practices	Areas
Know when the teachers have an assistant so that they plan	Management / use of TAs' role
Set time to plan with the teacher/ time allowed between the teacher and the TA	Management / use of TAs' role
Teachers explain quite well what TAs have to do	Teachers – TAs' cooperation
Teachers explain from the start of the term	Teachers – TAs' cooperation
TAs' notes on a little piece of a paper / feedback	TAs' tasks
A job description	Policy – makers
Reflection of what happened	Teachers – TAs' cooperation
A sort of 10' before the children came in	Management / use of TAs role

To begin with, the practices that could facilitate better communication concern, mostly, the management. The manager should plan in advance the schedule of the TA so that the teachers and the TAs would know in which class there will be one. One thing that was mentioned not only by the teacher P. but by the TAs and other teachers as well is the following.

> Worst thing is if someone comes and says 'can I help you'?
> (T, P.)

A schedule would not only benefit the teachers because they would be able to plan in advance a different way of teaching but it would also benefit both the children and the school management. The children would have more input and the principal would not need to spend time walking in classrooms and assess which case is in more need of a TA. Furthermore, the practices mentioned in the table imply that the management is able to assign a TA to a class regularly so that the teacher and the TA can talk about the class when they have time together. This time could facilitate an efficient work as it could be time for planning (Takala, 2007) together or for talking about 'what is going on for the week' (TA, K.), 'the group of children she is going to work with for this lesson, what we are going to be working on, this is for the following weeks' (T. F.), 'this is what this child needs to try, these are the objectives, this is what I would like you to do (T, N.)'. However, this is not possible because, according to the participants, there is a shortage in money available for hiring the respective amount of employees.

Many practices refer to the cooperation between the teachers and the TAs. Teacher training about the TAs could support the practices that refer to this cooperation. This could imply not only teacher training on their organizational skills but also the clarification of the TA role. The clarification of the role in terms of a job description is another practice in this table. Both a job description and the feedback that the TAs can provide the teacher could facilitate better communication, because:

> …feedback is almost as important as the giving out the lesson, too (T F.)

In conclusion, the teachers are directly related to the TA role as they are the ones who work closely with them. Although the TA role does not reduce teacher workload, there are a few practices that could point towards the better communication between the teacher and the TA and facilitate an efficient work. The practices suggested indicate a need to clarify the role of the TAs and its use by the school management.

Employment is school specific

The employment conditions of the TAs consist one more factor that affects their role and its use. The use of the TA role and their employment are connected because the characteristics of their employment affect the way in which the school management will use the role. The employment conditions will be discussed in terms of job position's criteria, stability, review of the tasks and management. The employment discussed below should be approached as one potential of the employment of the TAs and not as a general way of TA recruitment in schools in Sweden.

To begin with, the criteria of the employment of the assistants are school-based. The school is hiring qualified employees with teacher training, TA training, university level education or experience gained in working in Summer camps or sports. The labor market (Bach et al., 2006) that includes 'an increasing number of teachers coming from other countries' (A.P. J.) makes it easier to recruit qualified TAs. Otherwise, it would not be possible to recruit in this way as there would not be qualified candidates in the local labor market.

The number of the TAs who are employed is not pre-determined by any law but it depends on school current needs. Therefore, it is not clear whether the TAs are a stable component of the school workforce or not. According to the A.P., there are 6 TAs and 30 teachers from infants and up and half of the TAs are stable and have been working for many years. The working hours of this job position vary as TAs can work both full time and part time. So, the stable ones are those who work more than 75% and their employment is influenced by the way the school management recruits and that they include recreational (fritids) programme. As the TA cannot work 100% because the children are in the school for 6 hours, the school provides them the option to work 100% by combining it with the fritids programme. According to a teacher, there is no stable TA from y1 and up, which is not in line with what the A.P. said. The stability might have been interpreted in a different way because the A.P. was talking about their employment while the teacher was talking about the stable TA in the classroom. These can be two different things as there is a possibility to have a TA hired but not stable in one class. In general, there is an option to be employed for a period of years especially up to infant class where there are stable positions for the TAs because younger classes have to have a specific number of adults in relation to

the number of the students. However, it lifts up the question why there is a need to have a ratio in younger classes and not in older classes whereas, according to the y3 teacher, TAs would benefit the children in older classes as well. The debate on TAs as a stable component of school workforce highlighted issues of the stability of the person or of the job position. Although, not all the TAs consist a stable component of the school workforce, the job position could be stable. Most of the participants said that the position is stable and that the TAs usually do not stay long. A few of them linked their answer to the need of having TAs as a stable component of school workforce.

The TAs, whether they are stable or not, consist a part of school workforce and, thus, they are paced in the system and their tasks are reviewed. According to the TAs and the teachers, the management line is not clear as the TAs who work in fritids as well work under the supervision of the A.P. while some of the other TAs work under the supervision of the principal. In general, the one with whom someone has the development talk is the line manager. The development talk is a meeting that the employee and the manager have and during which the manager reviews employee's tasks. The development talks take place at least once a year which is formalized and there is a continuous follow-up through the year. They do not include only the review of the tasks but also talks about the salary. A development talk with a TA has a different structure than the others because the tasks are different. The tasks of the TA vary as there is no job description and, therefore, it is not easy to be reviewed. On the one hand, the absence of a job description would create problems in the management of the assistants, in their activity, and cooperation with the teachers as it was mentioned above, but, on the other hand, a job description would be a hindrance as the TAs would not do something that would have come up and it was not in the list.

To summarize, the characteristics of the labour market that determine the qualifications, the flexibility of stability of the job position or employee, the place the TAs have in the school system could create problems in the use of the TA role such as the relationships with the teachers and the time distribution of the management in continuous recruitment and review. These problems could affect the effective use of the TAs and their role.

Literature has lifted the TAs as a powerful resource that is under-used (Ferguson, 2014; Ward, 2011; Butt and Lance, 2009). The responses of the participants regarding the way in which the TAs are used as a resource focused on the amount of work that TAs have and the potential use of assistants. The majority of the TAs are used in a very good way but as a whole they are under-used because all the TAs have special skills of which the school is not taking advantage in a good way. The potential ways in which the TAs could be used more effectively involved TA training, organization and management. For instance,

> it seems to work okay, but I think it might be a good idea if they had some training before they started, a six week course or something and be suitable to work with children because not everybody is. You can't just take anybody in expecting … (TA, B.)

> … I think that for the younger children they are used a lot and quite well in the school I think so.. I think we would benefit from having more stability in terms of paid assistants

who stay in the school, who get to know the children, who have standards that the teachers have (T, P.)

The training mentioned above reflects a role which would contribute more if it was more pedagogically oriented and more stable. Furthermore, the standards that the teacher is talking about are attempted by school's criteria in the employment of the TA, as it was mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, each participant's response is unique, for example, even though the response of this teacher seems to be in line with the management, it stems from the fact that not only she has TAs periodically, but also she has teacher trainees who while they are not paid they help her very much and they support teaching. The other suggestions regarding the use of the TAs were related to organizational and management issues. For example,

under-used resource definitely, I feel like they could use more TAs and they could utilize us better instead of spending my time running around to different classrooms I could be utilized …better… in other way. to help them..but I 'm not ..not on the fault of the teachers, but I think on the fault of the management, being too … having so much in their hands. I think they really do rely on us to know where we are supposed to be and what we are supposed to do, which we all do but they could give more… structure or organized system (TA, K.)

no, they are not under-used but it could be made more effective (T, F.)

Aa it's hard to say under-used, because there is not any time that I am not doing anything, if you know what I mean, but under-used if you mean in capability…: I would like to say yes, I think if time was given to a TA to help plan something or even, not take a lesson but help along with taking some pressure off the teacher then yes they could be used more, if... then, you know it's completely to the TA if is willing to or want to do it. (TA, J.)

We lack interaction time (A.P. J.)

So, the TAs would be better used if they had some kind of formal form of exchanging daily planners, more structured tasks and so forth. What is interesting is that for the A.P. the time between the teacher and the TA would be a better use of the TAs while earlier other participants talked about the time between the teachers and the TAs as a practice that would facilitate better communication and efficient work and even as a way in which the TAs would feel more valued as the TA K. shared:

feel more involved, a bit more vital… I think being able to plan with the teacher would help … even if it was just for half an hour of the day ... or not every day but once a week

The organization and the management of the TAs is an area that could be developed further. Activity theory and the Engeström's developmental research work as applied in organizational studies could be considered proper for addressing this issue and aim to the development of the TAs as well. This is suggested not only by literature (Takala, 2007) but also by this study. For example, the suggestions that come from the participants regarding the use of TA role reflect the needs that this role

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has and they can be linked to activity theory in order to develop TA work. Training is raised as a need and it could be linked to the ZPD; i.e. the knowledge that the TA can acquire through the in-house training –as the APJ called it- as the context within which the TAs work and the interaction with the teachers and other TAs could facilitate a practice- based training. That would change the objectives of the TA activity as they would be new and based on specific needs. The time shared between the TAs and the teachers is one more need that could be linked to the division of labour. The TAs cooperate with other TAs and teachers, so a different planning in order to reach the (new) objectives would facilitate the development of the TA activity. These needs could be addressed in order to develop the activity of the TAs but a subsequent question would be about whether the activity of the TAs itself is needed or not as a component of the school workforce.

The responses of the participants about the presence of the TAs in the school were positive. The participants related the worthiness of the TAs to the contribution of the TAs in social practices, conflict resolution, practical matters and educational processes such as differentiation and teaching support. They argued that the presence of the TA matters as the teacher cannot be everywhere at once, and it is also beneficial to have a TA because they reduce the ratio. Additionally, the participants shared everyday practices that indicate that the TAs are needed. For example,

> it seems to be a shortage of staff[…] it seems that there is a
> need for TA in every classroom (TA, K.)

This TA is stretched between three different classrooms. During the observations, we had to move from one class to another spending more time going somewhere instead of doing something. TAs' perception about the whether the TAs are needed or not is mirrored in the following quotes as well:

> I am sure every single teacher would say yeah I could do
> more with another TA (TA, J.)

> I've heard at least from the teachers that there is a difference
> when I am there and when I am not there. (TA, K.)

In conclusion, employment conditions consist a vital parameter of the TA role in a school because they affect the way in which the TAs are used. According to the participants, there is a shared between the teachers and the TAs perception that there is a need for having a TA in the classroom. However, the teachers believe that having a TA is a luxury that the school cannot afford.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter concludes with the answers to the research questions of this study. Then it describes the implications of the findings. Later, suggestions for further research with respect to the TA role in Sweden and the limitations of this study will be, also, presented.

Research questions

The research questions that this study attempted to answer were related to the deployment of the TAs, especially, relating the way in which their activity supports student learning and teachers. The second research question referred to the employment of the TAs regarding the way in which this role is used in a school. The last question, focused on the needs of this role which would point to the development of the activity of the TAs. AT was used for answering these questions by identifying the activity of the TAs and the factors that affect it. Then the study was interested in exploring the way in which this activity is used in an organization, for example, in terms of the way in which the objectives could be reviewed. The way in which the TA role is used indicates changes that are needed in the TA activity. According to activity theory, these changes can be undertaken through remediation and reorganization and they stem from the collective needs of the stakeholders such as TA training, time and job description.

Research question 1: What is the activity of the Teaching Assistants in the school?

Sub-question:

- o How does Teaching Assistant activity support student learning and teachers?

To begin with, teaching assistant is the name that I decided to use in order to name the subject of the activity as described in Engeström's model (Engeström, 2001, p.135). The name I used was chosen randomly because, as Kerry (2005) and Balshaw and Farrell (2002) highlighted there is a plethora of names about the TAs in literature which according to this study could occur within one school as well. The activity of the TAs is based on Engeström's model and reflects what TAs do in the classroom by focusing on the objectives, community, mediating artifacts, rules and division of labour. TAs as the subject of the activity that takes place are members of two communities; TAs' and fritids staff's. The activity of the assistants (see Figure 6) consists of three kinds of objectives that include practical and social tasks and involvement in learning and teaching processes and they are dictated by the teacher. The means that the TA utilizes vary and they are, mostly, resources and materials that there are in the classroom used both as tools and signs during the activity and they are provided by the teacher. The rules that regulate the activity are also set by the teacher because they depend on class needs. The TAs cooperate closely with the teachers and other TAs in order to fulfill their tasks and reach the objectives.
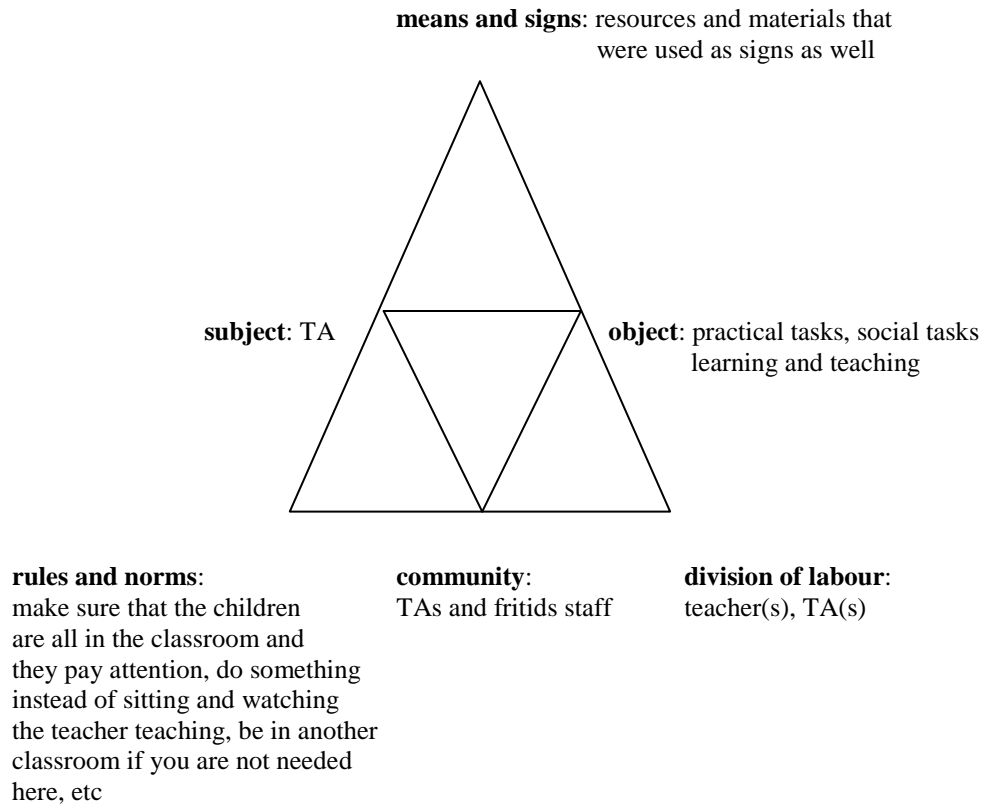
means and signs: resources and materials that
were used as signs as well

subject: TA

object: practical tasks, social tasks
learning and teaching

rules and norms:
make sure that the children
are all in the classroom and
they pay attention, do something
instead of sitting and watching
the teacher teaching, be in another
classroom if you are not needed
here, etc

community:
TAs and fritids staff

division of labour:
teacher(s), TA(s)

Figure 6 TAs' activity

The activity of the TAs as described according to the Activity System Analysis model provides a clear understanding about what TAs do in a school and which factors affect their activity. Such activity in the school is understood in different ways by the stakeholders but main characteristics of their activity are the teachers and the personality of the TAs. According to the teachers, this activity supports student learning and teaching mostly through differentiation, practical and social tasks. From TAs' point of view, their activity supports equally the teachers and students.

The viewpoints of the teachers vary about whether the activity of the assistants reduces teacher workload or not. Two out of three see this activity as student oriented and argue that TAs are not there to help the teacher. This point of view is contradictive to the title that TAs have in Sweden where they are called teacher assistants. According to the teachers, TAs could support teachers mainly by reducing the stress in the classroom and working on communication. The participants suggested a few simple practices such as the feedback that the TAs can give to the teacher on a piece of paper or more complicated such as a job description that could facilitate better communication between them.

The teachers and TAs share the same perspective about the communities to which the latter belong and sometimes create obstacles in the communication that takes place between them. The fact that the TAs belong to two communities could be approached as two different activities. Nevertheless, the two communities verify the difficulty in approaching human activity as the unit of analysis. The subject could belong to two communities, like in this case. The fritids community was mentioned

both because it has created obstacles in the communication of the TAs and the teachers, and because it affects the employment of the TAs.

Another parameter of the activity of the TAs is the artefacts that the assistants use. Even though the means that the TAs use are selected by the teachers, the symbolic way in which the assistants use the tools, for example what it means the distribution of the iPads, or how they will organize children's reading books shows how the personality is central to the activity of the TAs as not all them use in the same way the same tools. The way in which they will use the means affects not only the outcome of their activity but also the cooperation with the teacher because for example the teacher will need to explain in detail what the TA should do with the means while other TAs would do it by themselves.

TAs' personality has been also raised in the case of the rules that regulate their activity. The rules are in forms of norms and, therefore, they are formed by the teacher and TAs. As long as they are efficient, they rule and facilitate the cooperation and relationships.

From TAs' point of view and based on the comments they receive from the teachers and their distribution in more than one classes, their activity is needed. The school management as represented by the assistant principal and the teachers see the TA activity as more needed in the younger classes which need to have a ratio or which have more need in practical, social and pedagogical tasks, and as beneficial but a luxury for older classes. The way in which the management approaches the activity of the TAs is mirrored in the use of the TA role and, more specifically, the management of the TAs.

Research question 2: How is the role of the Teaching Assistants used in a school?

The next research question is about the employment of the TAs, which is an area that needs improvement (Takala, 2007), and more specifically about the way in which the TA role is used in a school. Such use of the role is reflected in the employment, employment conditions and the management of the TAs. The use of the TA role is determined by both the school and the policy.

The employment of the TAs is school based (Bach et al., 2006), and, therefore, school management determines the way in which the TAs will be employed, the employment conditions and how the TA role could be used more effectively within the school system. This job position is usually combined with the fritids job position and it can be part-time or full-time which affects directly the management of the TAs. TA qualifications vary and school management seeks qualified personnel even for a job position which has no prerequisites. This kind of recruitment is supported by the characteristics of the local labor market (Bach et al., 2006) which has increasing numbers of employees coming from other countries and there are many teachers amongst them.

Although, the job position of the assistants could be characterized as temporary, inconsistent and periodic (Ferguson, 2014), it could also be characterized as adaptable because it is a role that has no job description and adapts to the needs of the school. The TA role is stable for younger classes because children need support while the main reasons for not having stable TAs in older classes is the shortage in money and the fact that there is no need to have a ratio like in younger classes. The

shortage in staff makes the TA role more flexible as they are called to support the needs of more than one class. Although, the presence of the TAs in schools increases (Butt and Lance, 2009; Bach at al., 2006; Farrell et al., 2010; Warhurst et al., 2014; Kerry, 2005), participants say that the position could be stable and the TAs would not stay for long.

Although the schedule of the TAs is flexible and they do not stay for long, they are a part of school system. The place they have in it varies as not all the TAs have the same place in the system. This affects the review of their tasks (Butt and Lance, 2009). The review of the tasks occurs through development talks with the line manager who is different based on the place the TAs have in the school system. Of course the development talks differ because the TAs have different tasks.

There are different tasks because there is not a job description. This is the way in which policy affects the use of the TA role in a school. Apart from the job description in terms of tasks, the policy-makers affect the TA role by not providing a framework about the TA qualifications, too. That leads to more flexible employment conditions because both the job description and the qualifications are school based and affected by the local labour market (Bach et al., 2006). Such flexibility would not facilitate the development of this group.

As Takala (2007) suggested, an attempt towards the development of TAs' future good practices and the effective use of TAs is Activity Theory and, more specifically, Engeström's development work research (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Developmental work research seems suitable because it could be characterized as an interventionist approach for example, in work or organizations that aim to transformation. A.P.J.'s suggestion about the TA training could be mirrored in developmental work research as the suggestion was about peer training and in-house training. Such training highlights the knowledge that the TA can acquire through social interaction.

Research question 3: What are the needs for the Teaching Assistant role?

The needs that were highlighted with respect to the TA role are related to the current policy and the school management. Three needs that were raised are the TA training, a job description and time shared between the TAs and the teachers. All three indicate the changes that could occur in the activity of the TAs in order to develop their practice.

Training is the main issue that has been highlighted by literature and it needs to be addressed. There are no qualification requirements, therefore, the low educational attainment of the TA has been an obstacle as they can support student learning (Ferguson, 2014) when they are trained and/ or supported (Harris and Aprile, 2015; Farrell et al., 2010). The reason why there is such a need whereas the management tries to employ qualified employees is the employees' area of education. The areas of training that could support student learning would be conflict resolution, teaching methods, pedagogy and working with children.

Another need that has been highlighted by this study is regarding the TA employment (Takala, 2007) and more specifically a job description (Butt and Lance, 2009). A job description is needed not only for the employment of the assistants as the

employee and the employer will not be misled, but also for the communication and cooperation of the TAs and the teachers (Takala, 2007).

The cooperation between them is also affected by the lack of time shared between them (Takala, 2007). This need can be addressed within the school context and by school management. An alternative management would include a schedule that not only would make the TAs feel valued, but also that would help the teachers know when they have a TA. This time could also facilitate better communication between the teachers and the TAs, and a more effective use of the TAs.

What this study raised was not only the needs of the TA role but also the fact that this role is needed. This is mentioned by the TAs and the teachers based on their everyday activity and workload. The main obstacles in the use of the TA role seem to be organizational and financial. Activity theory could be helpful as it has been applied in organizational studies (Sannino et al., 2009), but the shortage in money which leads to the shortage in staff needs to be addressed by policy-makers.

Implications of findings

The findings of this study indicate an ambiguous role with respect to the tasks that the TAs have, and which could not function effectively as part of a system and/or organization. The TA role could be organized in a more effective way so that it would benefit the students, the teachers and the school management. First of all, the participants agreed on the training of the TAs and a TA training course has been discussed by them. Secondly, as the teachers are vital part of the TA activity, they could also attend a course during their teacher education programme on how to work with the TAs, however, this presupposes the clarified role of the TAs. A clarified role in education system would create job positions without the same responsibilities as the teachers but that could support teaching and student learning especially in the cases that the teachers need to differentiate or support for students with learning difficulties. The involvement of the TAs in learning and teaching processes would vary and be based on the training and qualifications of the TAs. The level of the involvement of the assistants could also facilitate another way of teaching like Takala (2007) suggested. The implications of the study point to the areas that could be further explored.

Future research

This case study highlighted a role that is under-researched and probably under-used. It is not only the role that is not clarified but also its use in a school and in a system. Future research could attempt to shed light both on the role and on its place in education system and explore its potentials in student learning, teacher profession and teaching methodology. The effectiveness of the TAs in student learning has been challenged mostly because by their training, therefore it would be interesting to explore further if and how they could support student learning, for example, in multicultural classes where students have different educational needs. Additionally, teacher retention is raised as an issue that needs to be addressed. Therefore, looking for the reasons of teacher retention and working on possible ways of using TAs for the reduction of teachers' stress like, for instance, in Butt and Lance's (2009) project would probably benefit a problem in teacher recruitment. Last, the TAs could probably support an alternative, more collaborative way of teaching which would make the use of their role more of an educational matter and less of an organizational

matter. These areas could not be addressed by this study not only because of its aim, but also because of the limitations of this study.

Limitations of study

This study has used qualitative methods to investigate a role in the context of one school in Sweden, therefore, there are limitations that should be taken into account. Firstly, the qualitative methodology and methods that were used do not allow the generalization of the findings, as the purpose of their use was only the in depth description of a complex, real-life situation. Another limitation stems from the specific context from which the sample was chosen and data were collected. The English speaking environment, where there was a specific use of the TAs and needs for this role, highlights the uniqueness of participants' responses and the findings and raises issues of reliability. The findings would not be the same if the study would have been applied in other schools in Sweden as each case is unique. Nevertheless, the similarities among various cases would indicate an effective use of the TA role.

To conclude, the findings of this qualitative ethnographic case study answered the research questions about the TA activity, the use of their role and the needs by highlighting the TA name, activity, relationships with the teachers, professional development and employment. The name of the TAs is an issue that concerns the policy makers as it does not affect their activity directly but it affects their employment. The activity of the TAs is affected by the two communities to which they belong and by the teachers as they are the ones who cooperate directly with them and determine the means that the TAs use and the rules in the classroom. This study highlighted that the activity of the assistants does not reduce teacher workload and it lifted up the cooperation and the communication between them as issues that need to be addressed in order to work efficiently. The study, also, indicated that the training of the TAs affects their activity and needs to be addressed. Other needs that should be addressed are the time that the TAs and the teachers have together and a job description for this role. Last, the TA employment is based on school criteria and the characteristics of the labor market. The job position is stable for younger classes- up to 6/7 years old- and it is combined with the fritids programme.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Sample of Consent forms

CONSENT FORM – TEACHERS

I have been asked to take part in the master thesis research specified above. I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement and I hereby consent to participate in this project.

I consent to the following:	Yes	No
Observation of my teaching.	☐	☐
Observation during the cooperation with Teaching Assistants.	☐	☐
Participation in interviews and informal conversations.	☐	☐
Data collected can be used for the purposes of the dissertation "Teaching assistant role in a school in Sweden: an ethnographic case study" for the 'International Master Programme in Educational Research' of the Department of Education and Special Education.	☐	☐

Name of Participant

School

Participant Signature
Date

Appendix 2 - Explanatory statement

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

You are invited to take part in this study. Please read this Explanatory Statement in full before deciding whether or not to participate in this research. If you would like further information regarding any aspect of this project, you are encouraged to contact the researchers via the phone numbers or email addresses listed above.

What does the research involve?

Teaching Assistants (TAs) consist an under-researched group whose presence and responsibilities in teaching and learning processes increase in many countries including Sweden. Nevertheless, their role is not clarified by policy documents. This study attempts to explore further this role as an activity consisted of the communication and the relation of many actors -such as rules, mediators, cooperation and TAs' activity's object as a collective goal- involved in a specific context such as a school. This is an attempt to clarify a role in a school as well as the way in which TAs could contribute into the educational practice more effectively.

This research is conducted for the purposes of the course PDA 184 "Master Thesis in Education" which is part of 'International Master Programme in Educational Research' given by the Department of Education and Special Education of Faculty of Education. As the researcher will be a TA, she will observe TAs' practice in school setting without an impact on her professional activity and will engage principals, teachers and TAs in personal interviews after the arrangement of an appointment with the participants.

Why were you chosen for this research?

The school was selected mostly because of researcher's dual role -a researcher and a TA- that allows her to enrich the data that will be gathered for clarifying TAs' role. Furthermore, the school unit provides a large amount of relative rich data as there are many TAs employed.

Consenting to participate in the project and withdrawing from the research

If you would like to participate in this research sign and return the consent form attached. Please be advised that your involvement in this research study is completely voluntary and you are also free to withdraw at any stage, or to withdraw any unprocessed data you may have supplied.

Possible benefits and risks to participants

The findings from this study will enrich the literature on TAs and clarify TAs' role in schools. Levels of discomfort and risk are considered minimal as the study attempts to approach TAs' role through their everyday practice and interaction and by highlighting potential patterns in this practice and interaction.

Confidentiality

The findings of this study will be used for the purposes of the course and they will be presented at the professors and the students that will attend the thesis defence at the end of the course. At all time participants' responses will be confidential and anonymous as pseudonyms will be used when reporting or quoting interview data. This research will be conducted in accordance with the protocols associated with the Swedish Research Ethical Guidelines (2011) regarding informed consent and the conduct of research.

Storage of data

Data will be stored safely in locked filing cabinets and password-protected computers and access to the data will be strictly restricted to the student and the professor in charge of the

supervision of the dissertation. As is the norm, the data will be destroyed after a period of five years.

Results

At the end of this study a summary report will be provided to the school via e-mail. Please feel free to contact Susanne or Efthimia if you have any questions about the study.

Thank you for your time,

Susanne Garvis and Efthimia Iatridou

Appendix 3 - Permission letter

Master thesis research: Teaching assistant role in a school in Sweden: an ethnographic case study

DATE: ……………………..

Professor Susanne Garvis and Efthimia Iatridou
Faculty of Education,
University of Gothenburg,
Department of Education, Communication and Learning
41767 Sweden

Dear ……………………………..,

Thank you for your request to recruit participants from the …. school…. for the above-named master thesis research.

I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement regarding the research and hereby give permission for this research to be conducted.

Yours sincerely,

(Signature of person granting permission)

(Name of person granting permission)
(Position of person granting permission)

Appendix 4 - Interview questions

- TAs' work

1. How are assistants called in the school?
2. Do you think that the name of the assistants reflects their workload?
3. Of what does the work of a TA consist?
4. Does it take place only in the classroom?
5. With whom do TAs cooperate in order to do their work?
6. Which would be the available means that TAs could use?
7. Is there a TA in the classroom every day?

- TAs' training and professional development

8. Do you think that TAs' education/ qualifications are relevant to their tasks?
9. Is there any need for further training based on their workload?
10. Would a TA have any ambition in further training or/ and professional development?

- Teachers' work in relation to TAs' work

11. How many hours do you work?
12. Do you have to work at home?
13. What are the causes of your workload in your opinion?
14. Does a TA reduce your workload with the tasks that s/he currently has?
15. Is a different use of a TA one (potential) option to the reduction of your workload?
16. Did your teacher education programme include courses about the management / cooperation with the TAs?
17. What practices could facilitate better communication between the teacher and the TA?
18. How can the teacher and the TA work efficiently?

- Employment and management

19. Would you say that TAs are a stable component of school workforce?
20. Is there any review of TAs' work?
21. Do you think that TAs are an under-used resource or not?
22. Is there a job description for TAs?
23. What would you advise TAs?

Appendix 5 - Observation schedule

-Who is taking part?
- How many people are there, their identities and their characteristics?
- How do participants come to be members of the group/event/activity?
- What is taking place?
- How routine, regular, patterned, irregular and repetitive are the behaviours observed?
- What resources are being used in the scene?
- How are activities being described, justified, explained, organized, labelled?
- How do different participants behave towards each other?
- What are the statuses and roles of the participants?
- Who is making decisions, and for whom?
- What is being said, and by whom?
- What is being discussed frequently/infrequently?
- What appear to be the significant issues that are being discussed?
- What non-verbal communication is taking place?
- Who is talking and who is listening?
- Where does the event take place?
- When does the event take place?
- How long does the event take?
- How is time used in the event?
- How are the individual elements of the event connected?
- How are change and stability managed?
- What rules govern the social organization of, and behaviour in, the event?
- Why is this event occurring, and occurring in the way that it is?
- What meanings are participants attributing to what is happening?