Investigating the role of Personal Assistants (PA's) for students with disabilities: Stories and experiences of PAs in a Further Education (FE) Institute in Ireland.

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Abstract

There is an increase of students with disabilities attending Further Education (FE) in Ireland and therefore, an increase in the demand for support. Personal Assistants (PAs) are employed in an Irish FE college to provide support to students with disabilities. Many studies focus on students with disabilities in higher (HE) and further education, but very few of these studies look at those people that make this possible There is a gap in research and particularly concerning PAs where little research was found. This study addresses this gap and aims to provide insights into PA's roles, responsibilities, and experiences. Six PAs in an Irish FE college shared their stories and experiences of being a PA in Ireland, narrative inquiry allowed for stories to be obtained using semi-structured narrative interviews. Thematic analysis was used as a tool to analyse and inquire into the data. Four themes which provide insights into the role and experiences of PA were chosen in line with the research question and sub-questions. The findings suggest that PAs are uncertain of their role. PAs identified some discrepancies with their job description leading to a sense of role confusion. PAs highlight their sense of being left behind with regards to pay and conditions leading to the idea of a PA role as a stepping stone and not a long -term position. PAs share their experiences about the joys of the role and the more challenging aspects of the role. There is no data on PAs in Ireland, therefore, I am conducting research in a new area. This study contributes to wider research by attempting to bridge the gap and give a voice to Irish PAs who have never, until now, shared their stories.

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AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access & Disability
BERA	British Educational Research Association
DSS	Disability Support Service
EPSU	European Public Service Union
ESPEN	The Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act
ETB	Education and Training Board
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
ISB	The Irish Statue Book
IUA	Irish Universities Association
LSW	Learner Support Workers
NCI	National College of Ireland
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
PAs	Personal Assistants

PLC   Post Leaving Certificate

QQI   Quality and Qualifications Ireland

SNA   Special Needs Assistant

UDL   Universal Design for Learning

ZPD   Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This study explores the FE sector in Ireland and the learning support they provide to students bringing us to the focus of the study, PAs. The study takes place in an Irish FE college where they employ nine PAs, of which six are taken part in this study. This chapter fleetingly outlines the background, rationale, and purpose of the study. Aims and objectives are outlined below as they provide the backbone to the study. The methodology is briefly discussed, and the structure of the overall project is also addressed.

1.2 Background, Rationale & Origin of Study

In recent years there has been an increase in students with disabilities attending FE settings in Ireland and with that, learning support must be available to those students. AHEAD (2020, p.1) states learning support services have also increased massively from the year 2009 with 4853 to 15846 in the year 2019. More recently, there is a widening participation rate of students with disabilities attending HE and FE colleges, as part of the 2022 budget Simon Harris has made access to FE more accessible by abolishing the government levy cost of 200 euros (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2021), making progression routes more feasible for students.

The increased numbers have meant a significant increase in the numbers of support staff for students with disabilities. In the FE sector, this has led to a large increase in PAs and a fast increase due to the demand. The increase of students has led the role of a PA to be reactive with roles changing to meet the needs and demands of students.

There are very few research articles that explore the PA role in-depth in fact, Hendrick et al. (2012, p.163) use the word 'total exclusion' when referring to the literature on PAs. The few articles that do explore the role outline different variations of the PA role. The

evident gap in research appears to conclude insignificance, and that PAs are almost unheard of. This alone gave me the push I required to carry out research on PAs in an Irish FE college to explore their role, responsibilities, and experiences.

PAs are employed to support students with disabilities to enable them to study (Parker, 199, p.1) in an educational setting. PAs help with assignments and class materials that enable students to fully participate in their studies. The role of a PA ranges from providing physical support to in-class support such as note taking (Stumbo, 2009; Hendrick et al. 2012, p.173 & Hendricks et al. 2017, p. 77).

The idea for the study stemmed from my profession as I am currently a PA in this FE college in Ireland. There are two main reasons why I chose to research PAs, one being the lack of information on the role as discussed above. Secondly, I am new to the role of a PA and I would like to find out more about the position from the more experienced PAs.

Aforementioned, this study takes in a FE college in Ireland. To set the scene, this college is one of the largest FE colleges in Ireland and is situated on the outskirts of an urban area. I am taking extra efforts maintaining confidentiality of the FE college and participants; therefore, I will refer to the college as "FE college" throughout the study. I will cite the college policy as "College policy, 2022". As an insider to this research, it is my responsibility to ensure I share the untold stories in a way that will justify my fellow PAs. As an insider, I must question and be aware of my values, beliefs, and positionality in this research. This will be addressed throughout the study.

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1.3 Aims, Objectives, and Significance

The study aims to explore the practicing role and experiences of PAs in an Irish FE college. I aim to uncover the untold stories and the hidden realities of the PA role. I aim to gather insights into the role of PAs in an Irish FE college to combat the evident gap in research. This study was underpinned by a set of research objectives, outlined below:

- To explore the role and responsibilities of a PA in a FE college

- To better understand the different conceptions of the PA role and to analyse with respect to existing terminology

- To address the gap in research surrounding PAs in education.

- To better understand the realities of the role by listening to the stories and experiences of PAs

The objectives are the backbone of this research, they help shape and guide the researcher throughout the study. The objectives will be addressed throughout this study and act as an invisible piece of string binding this study together.

The chosen research question of 'What is the role and experiences of practicing PAs in an Irish Further Education College?' and sub-questions were developed to help set the boundaries for research and informed my choice of methodology. The sub questions are:

- Who are PAs? (Exploring Background, Motivation, Values, and Identity)

- What is their work environment, (including, working conditions, and status)?

- What are the role and responsibilities of the PA in the Irish FE Sector?

- What are the PA experiences? (Understanding their perception of their impact /role).

This research is not only important but required to spread knowledge surrounding the PA role in an FE college, thereby adding to wider research in a neglected area. Stumbo et al.

(2009, p.12) agrees with a statement made by Hendrick et al. (2012, p.163) as mentioned earlier the word, "exclusion" was noted as a prevailing word to refer to the little research on PAs in Ireland. This particular word is essential here as the PA role has been around for many years and there is still little information out there on PAs in FE sectors. Therefore, this study is required in paving the gap in research by introducing PAs and sharing their voices for the first time.

1.4 Methodology

Narrative inquiry was chosen for this study as it was deemed the most appropriate for addressing the research question. A narrative refers to "a story of a sequence of events" (Josselson, 2010, p. 4). It enabled the PAs to share their stories based on events and allowed me to see from their perspectives (Kohler Riessman, 2008, p.9). Narrative inquiry offered the opportunity to "access participants' life experiences and engage in a process of storytelling" Leavy (2009, as cited in Kim 2016, p.32), and as Kohler Riessman (2008, p.9) states pulled me into their world and allowed me to uncover the untold stories of PAs in a FE college in Ireland. There is no evidence of any research considering the views of Irish PAs. Narrative inquiry offered a way to gain insights and to hear first-hand stories told by PAs.

As part of this study, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory was referenced particularly to understand the working environment of PAs It was used as a tool to inform the interviewing questions in relation to the working environment, see chapter three.

Semi-structured narrative interviews were used in this study, Hermanns (1991, as cited in Jovchelovitch & Martian, 2007, p.10) suggests "semi-structured interviewing enriched by narratives" allows stories to unfold during the interviewing process. Semi-structured narrative interviews offered flexibility as it enabled me to develop a set of

questions that were used as a prompt because not all questions were asked as I followed the participant's trail (Kohler Riessman, 2008, p.24) leading to new findings. The PA job description was used as a prompt during the interviewing process because it allowed PAs to compare the expectations of the role to the realities of the PA role. A theme was generated following the data obtained.

1.5 Structure of the Research Study

This study involves five chapters. Chapter One outlines the introduction to the overall study. Chapter two involves the literature review where a range of research studies, policies, and academic papers at national and international levels were examined. Chapter three contains the methodology of this study. It discusses the choice of narrative for the research design and also explains participant selection, the chosen method, and ethical considerations. Findings and Discussions are presented in Chapter Four, the final four themes will be discussed. Themes were generated using Braun and Clarkes (2006) six steps to thematic analysis. The data obtained allowed me to create themes that best represent the outcomes of the interviewing stage.

Chapter Five provides the conclusion to the study. Implications of findings for practice and further research are outlined. A set of recommendations are explored and discussed within the chapter. Following the closing chapter are the appendices, which contain the consent form, information sheet, and other relevant aspects that helped to shape the study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to offer an exploration of wider research and literature relating to learning support for students with disabilities, including PAs in the FE sector. The purpose is to appraise the PA role and system of disability support. To set the scene for this chapter, a funnel method was used starting with wider research and slowly, narrowing my search to reflect the research question and to reflect the Irish FE college where the study is taking place. The overarching ideas for this chapter were selected using a systematic review of the literature. The presenting gap of PAs in literature allowed me to make alternative searches using the key search method. I searched for student supports or learning supports instead of PAs to access a wider research selection and literature.

I researched a few key areas in this chapter starting off board looking at students support services and terminology at international level. The scale of the study began to narrow down to address the key areas within the Irish context using a funnel like approach. The history of learning supports in Ireland is explored and the current FE policies that shape the sector are discussed. The roles and responsibilities of PAs were mapped out and discussed in line with the Irish FE college policy as this is a grey area in research resulting in very few articles and research papers.

2.2 Exploring Terminology and Roles of Student Support Services at International and National level

As noted in the introduction, there is a shortage of literature on PAs in FE sectors, it is of utmost importance that wider literature is sought. This was done by using a keyword search to seek literature on student supports that portrayed similar and dissimilar roles to that of a PA. I opted to focus on research from America, Spain and England, these three countries were chosen to explore the roles and responsibilities of learning support and PAs in their context. Secondly, I looked at the terminology used to describe the student support services in these three countries to determine the multiple terms used for potentially the same role.

At a national level, I explored the role of an SNA because it is a highly recognised role in Ireland that involves supporting students with disabilities to strive in an educational setting. After conducting an in-depth analysis of both the SNA and PA role, they appeared to have quite a few similarities in terms of duties, a comparison of both roles is outlined below.

2.2.1 International Role Descriptions

Three research papers (Stumbo et al., 2009; Hendrick, 2012 & Hendricks, 2017) were identified from the American context, presenting PAs as personnel employed in post-secondary schools to support students with severe physical disabilities. All papers, although researched separately had similar conclusions regarding the role of a PA which was to provide essential in-class support for students with disabilities and provide support that aids participation in the college environment (Hendrick et al., 2012, p.173 & Hendricks et al., 2017, p.77), these supports are very much physical based with the PA role portrayed as a hands-on role or active role.

Interestingly, Stumbo et al. (2009) and Hendrick (2012) expressed that the employment of a PA in this educational context is actually, employed separately through an agency that caters to the needs of the students in the home environment as well as the educational environment. Stumbo et al. (2009) briefly described the role of a PA involving home care such as getting dressed and bathing but also, attending the college environment to help the student (p.13), Stumbo (2009) also draws attention to an outside agency or service who provide PAs, therefore, the college or school does not provide the PAs for the students in attendance (p. 17). Similar, Hendrick (2012) argued the role of a PA in post-secondary education was required to support students with disabilities who attend the college and he also expressed how PAs were recruited from a disability service, that was outside the college grounds (p. 174), A major difference here is PAs who are recruited through the agency are required to provide homecare (p. 174). In agreement with Hendrick (2012), Hoenig et al. (2009) states,

> Personal assistance services (PAS) refer to human help provided to individuals in specific activities that are generally obligatory for bodily maintenance and for living in the community, comprising the activities of daily living, PAS includes all help, whether hands-on, standby, or supervisory, whether paid or unpaid. (Hoenig et al, 2009, as cited in Stumbo, p.12)

This quote presents the role of a PA in light of homecare, or the healthcare profession. It does not reflect PAs in an educational setting despite being in a paper directly aimed at PAs in a post-secondary context.

In the Spanish context, a study carried out by Morina and her team in 2017 focused on the inner workings of disability offices across 7 universities where their role was very much associated with a more academic-based role in contrast to the above study in the American

context. They provide learning support by helping students with disabilities with assignments (Morina et al., 2017, p. 1615), assisting students with technology and catering to their everyday needs (Morina et al., 2017), and, this study reflected that of a PA in an English context, one particular piece of research by Parker (1999) provided information on PAs in a University in East London. The study highlight two distinguishable needs of a student to which a PA would cater, they were, "academic needs or personal needs" (p.489). The PAs provided both supports however, there was a difference in terms of funding therefore, students must differentiate between the services required (Parker, 1999, p.399). Parker (1999) states if a student needed a note taker or in-class assistance, they would request an academic PA, this would include working with a student one on one to provide adequate support (p.399).

Another English study by Bailey & Robson (2004) proved to hold similarities to Parker (1999) and Morina's et al. (2017) studies on learning support services. This study was concerned with Learner Support Workers (LSW) across five institutions, and their duties in an FE college in England. The role of an LSW is to work with students on a one-to-one basis, working with groups of students, and providing supervision in the college library (Bailey & Robson 2004, p. 379). It was noted that LSWs provided academic support to students who needed support with assignments, Bailey & Robson (2004, p. 379) state that the work of an LSW sometimes overlaps that of an FE teacher, especially when the LSW provides academic support in the form of tutoring. The LSWs are also required to set up workshops to get students engaged throughout the academic year (Bailey & Robson 2004, p. 378). As this study was carried out in 5 FE colleges, one college provided only physical support to their students who required such and that was in line with the American study (Bailey & Robson 2004, p. 379). It is clear that the PA title is associated with a more physical role, hands on approach to someone with a more severe disability and, the learning support service seems to

be a more academic based role. This section provided information on the role of a PA and learning support services at an international level with reference to the element of support they provide to their students.

2.2.2 Terminology in International Studies

As I examined the papers at international level across the three countries outlined above, I noticed the title of learning support changing and, this was a concern for other researchers like Morina et al. (2017) in the Spanish context and Bailey and Robson (2004) in the English context.

The Spanish study by Morina et al. (2017) noted the name change across 7 universities in Spain. They noted how the name of the service changed from one university to the next. One university called the service 'unit of attention', another referred to it as 'support service', and another 'support office for people with disabilities' (Morina et al., 2017, p. 1612). One key recommendation put forward by Morina et al. (2017) and her team state the following: "Each university has different resources, we should uniform this a little because, at some universities, students receive more, less, or different resources" (p.1616). The word 'uniform' is essential here, the need to create a recognisable and identifiable term is hugely needed to ensure a fair and effective service is offered to all who require it.

The problem is that the term for learning support is different in many FE and HE colleges leading to an undefined role and unfamiliar terms (Morina et al., 2017, p. 1612). This was explored because the PA term seems to be an unfamiliar term, and Morina's (2017) study provides the idea for uniformed titles to determine the comparability or the service and to avoid confusion amongst college students.

In agreement with Morina and her team (2017), the English study highlighted the inconsistency regarding the title of an LSW, so much so, that the researcher, Bailey & Robson (2004) was confused about the title of each learning support role, second-guessing the term by stating "however titled" when referring to the LSW term. This highlights the confusion surrounding the different terms used in FE and HE colleges in the Spanish and English contexts.

It was necessary to seek international literature and studies regarding student support to acknowledge similar and dissimilar roles to PAs but also to explore the ever -changing titles of student support services across intuitions at an international level furthermore, I will now discuss a potentially similar role to a PA from a national level below.

2.2.3 Student Supports: A comparable Irish Role SNA vs PA

It is important to explore similar Irish roles as this study is taking place in Ireland. Literature has revealed SNAs (Special Needs Assistants) as the most recognisable form of student supports here in Ireland. Much research has outlined many similarities between the SNA and the PA role, some of which will be explored below. Aforementioned, SNAs are the most recognised role that involves supporting people with disabilities in an educational setting in Ireland. There is no shortage of information out there on SNAs as the role is widely recognised within schools in Ireland. What is of particular interest here is the definition of an SNA which mentions the supporting element of their role and reflects their place of work, an educational setting, An SNA is "an individual who provides support to "students who have care and educational needs in a school setting" (NCSE, 2003, p.2). The SNA definition was widely available and easily obtained. The term SNA is associated with support in most

primary and secondary school settings (NCSE, 2003); therefore, it is a well-known term and has a great presence here in Ireland.

The PA definition shares many similarities to the SNA definition, The most accurate definition of a PA was outlined by Parker (1999, p.1), a PA is "all forms of human assistance provided directly to students with disabilities and, without which, they would be unable to study". Parker provides a definition that highlights the supporting element of the role in an educational setting just like the SNA definition. What's striking here from the literature is that both SNAs and PAs share some roles and responsibilities which are comparable such as, support with mobility, and personal care if required, depending on the nature of the student (NCSE, 2003 & Parker, 1999, p. 489), and they work directly with those who have disabilities (NCSE & Hendrick et al., 2012, p.73), to access both the SNA and PA service, students need to disclose a disability to the school (NCSE, 2003, & Majoko, 2018 & Fuller, 2003). SNAs also provide in -class supports by engaging with the "teaching and learning process" (Logan, 2006, p.97). Hemmingsson et al. (2003, as cited in Hendrick et al 2017, p.73) state SNAs see themselves as a "help teacher" or assistant to the class teacher, providing supervision and assisting in planning (Logan, 2006, 96). Although throughout literature, they share potentially similar duties, there are also key differences in those to which they cater too, SNAs cater to the needs of children whilst PAs provide support to teenagers and adults (logan, 2006, p.93, Stumbo 2009, p.11 & Hendrick et al. 2012, p.161). SNAs provide supports in primary and secondary schools whereas, PAs are usually associated with supports in the post- secondary, FE, and HE sectors (Hendrick et al. 2012, p,11, NCSE & logan, 2006, p.93). SNAs appear to hold status in Ireland whereas it can be said after an in-depth analysis of literature, PAs are practically unheard of in terms of student support in Ireland.

2.3 Development of Learning Support in Ireland

The development of learning support in Ireland was considered relevant to this study as it is concerned with PAs in the Irish FE sector. I undertook research of the policies relating to the development of learning supports in Ireland to better understand the major changes in terms of inclusive student support services in Ireland pulling away from the past stigma of disabilities. This research highlighted several key insights that helped shape the study.

The history of the development of services for people with disabilities in Ireland has expanded throughout the years. As Ireland was hugely influenced by the workings of the Catholic church, most disability services were associated with religious organisations (Moving Ahead, 2014, p.1), those services were identified as "Daughters of Charity and The Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul (1922-1926) (Moving Ahead, 2014, p.2) and from this specialised schools were established for adults, teens and children with "intellectual disabilities" (Moving Ahead, 2014, p.2). However, at this time Ireland saw those with disabilities as a problem that must be fixed, reflecting a medical model of disability. In the 1950s, the disability services extended into the educational sectors, however, they were named 'special schools' which created a stigma in society (Moving ahead, 2014, p.2 & Banks et al., 2018, p. 4). Leading up to this stage, people with disabilities were almost segregated in society in the name of providing additional support.

In 1998, the Education Act was introduced. This act encouraged students with disabilities to attend mainstream schools. This led to the requirement for resources and learning supports to be included in primary and secondary schools (Banks et al., 2018, p.5). Student support such as SNAs was employed in many mainstream schools to assist children with disabilities in Ireland (ESPEN Act 2004, p.14). Much of the focus was then on the

provision of SNAs to support the increase of students with disabilities to avail themselves of mainstream education. The view of disability improved or changed overtime to form a more inclusive view thereby, leading to the acceptance of learning support services such as SNA to be employed solely to support students with disabilities in a mainstream school.

The attention of student support then moved steadily onto FE and HE colleges as the number of students with disabilities attending increased tremendously during the 20th century (Irish Universities Association, 2007, p.27). The "student support act 2011" was created to ensure services were available to students with disabilities in HE and FE settings (Student Support Act, 2011, p.9, as cited in the Irish Statue Book). The policy highlighted the learning supports within the colleges and promoted inclusive education (Support Act, 2011, p.9, as cited in the Irish Statue Book). Although the FE sector was behind in its introduction to student support due to little uptake in adult education, it now has many current policies such as SOLAS that encourage inclusive practice.

2.4 Policy Provisions Shaping the FE sector

I have conducted an analysis of current policy on disability support in education to explore the key provisions and aims for student support. This study takes place in an Irish FE college and therefore, the governing policies set the context for this study by outlining the need for student supports as documented in FE policy.

The FE sector started to take shape with the formation of SOLAS in 2013, Simply, SOLAS is an authoritative body that oversees the provision of quality education and training in the FE sector (McGuinness et al, 2014, p.20). The most recent strategy put forward by SOLAS is 'The National Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy (2020-2024)". This

strategy aims to improve access to the FE sector by setting out a clear plan 'based on three pillars of skills, pathways, and inclusion' (FET Strategy, 2020-2024, p.16). The important aspect of this strategy is in section 6, which outlines inclusion in FE sectors, to achieve this, learner supports is considered an essential element in the FE sectors (FET Strategy, 2020-2024, p. 45). It is noted in the strategy, 'that consistent learner support' should be evident in FE colleges to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to strive in the FE sector (FET Strategy, 2020-2024, p.38). The current FET strategy highlights the need for student support in ETBs which is a step in the right direction in terms of inclusion and learning support teams.

In 2018, AHEAD was established to create and empower an inclusive environment for those with a disability in both educational and employment settings (AHEAD, 2020, p.5). AHEAD (2020) recognises PAs as 'educational support workers' who assist students with disabilities in higher education (AHEAD as cited in Phillips & Clarke, 2010, p.7), Although PAs are mentioned by AHEAD (2020), there is no mention of the role and responsibilities of PAs in HE colleges. There are more students with disabilities availing of HE and this is mainly due to the large amount of funding going into the sector.

Recently, 12 million euros was awarded to support students with autism and learning disabilities to enrol in HE colleges in Ireland (The Irish Times, 2022). The funding is geared towards the creation of sensory rooms and teaching materials that will support these students to thrive in the educational environment. The question arising here is simple, if there is an increase of students with disabilities attending FE and HE, will there be an increase in student supports personnel to meet the demand?, the forgotten element within current literature is student support services that are surely required to address the demand of students with disabilities in education, the idea of 'invisible workers' emerged form a study conducted by

Fortune (2021) where student support personnel felt undervalued (p. 109) and considering this is a fairly new study, this is concerning. Supporting students with disabilities is an area that Ireland seeks to improve by paving a smooth pathway to FE and HE institutes but this will result in a higher demand for student support services as these services will be required to assist the students however, there is no support or recognition given to these services to meet the demand, therefore, student support and learning support staff are overlooked in the process (Fortune, 2021, p 110).

2.5 The Existence of PAs, Access to PA Services and Working Conditions

The purpose of this section is to provide information on how PAs come to be employed in the FE sector. Access to the PA service and the working conditions of PAs are also discussed, this is a grey area in research as there seems to be little literature on this therefore, this section seeks to address the grey area in research.

2.5.1 Higher Educational Authority (HEA)

Where do PAs come from, and why do they exist? The answer simply lies with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and SOLAS. HEA has the core responsibility for the overview and implementation of regulations for the HE sectors (HEA, 2022). One of the most important functions of HEA is to provide funding for not only HE sectors but also FE sectors in Ireland. The funding provided is geared towards supporting students with disabilities to enable them to participate effectively in HE and FE educational settings (HEA, 2022, p. 4). The funding covers and I quote, "non-medical helpers such as personal assistants" who strive to support students who have disabilities, and who require assistance' with mobility (HEA,

2022, p.11). HEA identifies PAs as those who work directly with students with physical disabilities such as visual impairment or mobility issues that work directly with a student on a one-to-one basis (HEA, 2022, P.11).

HEA conducted a review of funding for students with disabilities in 2017, again highlighting PAs as a service found in FE and HE settings. Ironically, the second highest amount of funding was provided for PAs in FE and HE settings, with the largest amount of funding aimed at learning support (HEA, 2017, p.29). The cost of the PA service 'was 4.7 million' over three years, 2012-2015 (HEA, 2017, p.29). Focusing on the academic year 2014-2015, the image below shows where the amount of funding for PAs has been granted in the various institutes. With PA's being highlighted in pink, it is evident most PAs are being employed in non-ETB FE colleges (HEA, 2017, p.30). To delve deeper, the college that this study has taken place in is part of the FE governing body, which is shown in the visual below under ETB of which 29% of funding was provided for the facilitation of PAs in education. The report states if funding is not "forthcoming", they must only fund the essential services and states PAs as a priority.

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Figure 4:4 Expenditure under the fund by type of institution, 2014/15

All Institutions

7% 11% 13% 11% 20% 5% 9% 24%

Irish Universities

8% 16% 12% 7% 18% 3% 4% 32%

Institutes of Technology

10% 8% 12% 10% 17% 5% 15% 23%

Education and Training Board

2% 8% 18% 23% 29% 6% 5% 9%

Other HE Colleges (Non HEA Funded)

5% 8% 17% 13% 22% 5% 30%

Non ETB FE College

2% 9% 19% 9% 61%

Other HEA Funded Institutions

12% 12% 4% 14% 22% 2% 34%

- Assistive Technologies
- NoteTakers
- ISL/Speedtext
- Personal Assistants
- Targeted Transport
- Tuition – Subject Specific Tuition
- Study Skills/Learning Support
- Other

Source: FSD Expenditure 2012 to 2014 (Excel sheet)

Figure 1: Image adapted from "HEA review of the fund for students with disabilities" by HEA 2(017, p.30). Retrieved from HEA - Review of the Fund for Students with Disabilities

2.5.2 HEA to SOLAS

HEA provided funding for students with disabilities since 2003', until recently, in 2020 the 'fund for students with disabilities for further education transferred to SOLAS' (SOLAS, 2020, p.4). To gain funding for PAs, the educational setting should be a full- time PLC or FET course in Ireland (SOLAS, 2020, p. 10). Identical to the HEA report on funding, PAs are funded under the term 'non-medical helpers' (SOLAS, 2020, p.9). According to SOLAS (2020, p.13) "non-medical helpers such as a personal assistant or note taker provides help to students with disabilities who require help with logistical and personal care requirements associated with attendance on a course of study". This funding may be used to deliver assistance to students during the academic year, PAs may be required to support students with mobility, Autism, and learning difficulties (SOLAS, 2020, p.13). Despite the changeover from HEA to SOLAS, it appears no review of the role was conducted even though it is one of the largest areas funded in the FE sectors in terms of student support.

2.5.3 Access to the PA Services

SOLAS requires a form titled 'assessment of need' where disclosures must be made and forms should be filled out with a representative of the college to fulfil the payment (SOLAS, 2020, P.7). SOLAS highlights the need for 'psychological, educational or orthopaedic consultant' report to obtain funding for PAs (SOLAS 2020, p.20) and access to the PA service.

The Disability Act 2005 states that assessment of needs should be sought for "health and educational needs" (Disability Act 2005, as cited in the Irish statuary book, 2005). The assessment from a psychologist takes the form of a written report or document that will contain information on one's disabilities and required resources (Disability Act 2005, as cited in the Irish statuary book, 2005). To gain access to PA support in many colleges, this report is

required, also known as a disclosure. Despite there being no legal grounds to provide the PA service to students with disabilities, the requirement of the educational report is essential to determine the level of support needed and to request funding from SOLAS. It is not unusual for disclosures to be requested by a college to gain access to the PA service, in fact, Majoko (2018) states that disclosures are requested to gain access to resources in many FE and HE educational institutes worldwide (p.2). In agreement with Majoko's statement, Fuller (2003) outlines how students are required to make a disclosure to their college to access not only PA supports but for additional supports such as exam accommodation and learning support services (p.7). Disclosures must be made to receive funding for the provision of PAs in any given FE college.

The PAs very existence is dependent on funding provided by SOLAS, the number of students attending the individual FET college reflects the number of PAs that should be employed to cater to the needs of students with disabilities. Disclosures must be made to the college to gain access to the PA service, and of course, to gain funding for the service.

2.5.4 Working Conditions

It is evident that PAs are funded to support students with disabilities in FE colleges here in Ireland however, there is little information on the working conditions of PAs in this sector. To overcome this barrier, I sought the job description of a PA from the ETB website that also provided little information about working conditions however, the pay was addressed.

The hourly pay of a PA is currently 14.72 including holiday pay ("Governing Body", 2021). There is no evidence of a pay scale for PAs however, the job description states the rate of pay is 'subject to review' ("Governing Body", 2021). On average PAs work 30 hours per

week in accordance with individual colleges ("Governing Body", 2021). There is no evidence

of any circular letters uncovered from research and very little information on the working

condition of PAs in research. It is evident that PAs hold little status here in Ireland in

comparison to the SNA role mentioned in the above theme.

Despite this, the FE college this study is taking place in has a policy on learning

support that outlines the duties of a PA within their college, and this will be explored in the

next section.

2.6 Role and Responsibilities of Irish PAs in a FE college

This section is concerned with the roles and responsibilities of PAs in an Irish FE

college, this section was chosen in light of the research question and FE college that the study

is taking place in. Aforementioned, there is a lack of information out there on PAs with little

research on their roles and responsibilities especially in the FE sector. This is a grey area in

research and because of that, I used the policy from the chosen FE college where this study

has taken place to address the gap. This policy maps out the expected roles and

responsibilities of an Irish PA in the FE sector.

This study is taking place in a FE college in Ireland; therefore, it is essential to

explore the policies regarding PAs. The college provided a policy document titled "Special

Educational Needs Policy" (2022). The policy reflects an inclusion policy and is underpinned

by the ESPEN act (2004) with the aim of excluding barriers and empowering students to

participate in everyday college life, the focus here is on the abilities of the students ("College

policy", 2022, p.1).

The policy highlights the learning supports available in the college. However, before a student can access the services, a disclosure should be made by the student. The disclosure will require a written report and outlined the nature of disability and supports required ("College policy", 2022, P.1). Once this stage is complete, a student will be assigned to a PA who will assist the student throughout the year if needed ("College policy", 2022, p.1). Disclosures were mentioned as a means to access learning support services by the following researchers Majoko (2018) & Fuller (2003).

The roles and responsibilities of the PAs are identified in this policy, PAs should provide a safe environment for the students and therefore, play a role in the health and safety of students, they assist to the emotional needs, physical needs, and educational needs of all students who attend the PA room ("College policy", 2022, p. 5). This Irish FE college provides a sensory room where access is obtained via PA room, this is in line with the emotional element helping students to cope with pressures of college life.

The PA must document all sessions with students on an EXCEL sheet for teachers to access, providing information on the assignments covered ("College policy", 2022, p. 9). The EXCEL sheet is accessible by all staff on Moodle, this keeps an open line of communication between PAs and teachers ("College policy", 2022, p. 9). PAs also work with the deputy principal and SEN coordinator where they engage in regular meetings to discuss matters such as timetables, resources, progress and reasonable accommodation ("College policy", 2022, p. 4). An essential role of a PA in this FE college is to provide reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities, PAs supervise these centres and are readers and scribes to many students during the exam period ("College policy", 2022, P.2). PAs also provide training to students who wish to use assistive technology such as C-pens to support students with academic tasks ("College policy", 2022, p.5).

The most vital role of a PA is to assist students with assignments, the PAs are required to book in students who need extra support with their studies ("College policy", 2022, P.9). One to one support is provided by PAs and student support services, and this is evident in literature (Hendrick et al., 2017). The element of one to one support is underpinned by the work of Vygotsky and his theory of ZPD and Scaffolding. The term ZPD refers to the areas in-between what a child can do on their own and with support from a more abled or trained other (Raymond 2020, as cited in Tadijev 2002, p. 2). Following on from the workings of ZPD is scaffolding, another approach introduced by Vygotsky, when a more trained other provides assistance to the student in the form of scaffolding to help them complete a task and this is done by providing "individualised support" (Bransford, Brown & Cocking 2000, as cited in Tadijev, 2002, p.2). PAs provide one to one support for their students (Hemmingsson et al., 2003, p.92) where they potentially scaffold the students learning by using 'hints or prompts' (Tadijev, 2002, . p.3) to get them to understand the material provided by the class teacher. Notice, the policy is very much associated with the educational aspect and is underpinned by the works of Vygotsky, as Kuznetsova & Peaucelle (2008, p.17) states, he is "the founder of development education", supporting students as they develop, linking to the works of a PA.

The FE policy outlines the roles and responsibilities of PAs; however, this policy is not noted alongside the other policies on the college website and is not easily accessible to students. The above information provided by the FE college policy was the most accurate description of duties performed by PAs despite, wider literature being explored, the roles and responsibilities of PAs seemed to be lacking.

2.7 The Research Question

The literature has informed the research question that being, 'What is the role and experiences of practicing PAs in an Irish FE College?'. After an extensive exploration of the literature and research, it is clear PAs voices and stories are missing. There is an evident gap in research regarding PAs in the FE sector with little knowledge surrounding the PA roles, responsibilities, and experiences of practicing PAs, and this is something I want to explore further, thus leading to the formation of the research question.

Sub questions were created to help guide the study as they are areas that I seek to explore despite the gap surrounding PAs in research. They offer the researcher a sense of direction and capture the missing elements in research such as emotions, joys and frustrations. Sub questions are as follows:

- Who are PAs? (Exploring Background, Motivation, Values, and Identity)

- What is their work environment, (including, working conditions, and status)?

- What are the role and responsibilities of the PA in the Irish FE Sector?

- What are the PA experiences? (Understanding their perception of their impact /role).

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter outlined a review of literature and wider research that related to this project. After reviewing the literature, it is clear the role of a PA and student support services are undervalued with low pay and status in comparison to the SNA role in Ireland. A key learning note relating to international literature is the idea of a generalised title to reflect the role of student supports, as seen in the literature review, the title changes often, leading to a sense of little identity.

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Conducting this literature review identified an evident gap in research concerning PAs in Ireland, especially in the FE sector. Wider literature outlines the roles and responsibilities of learning support services with very few discussing PAs, moreover, the PAs voice and experiences are missing from research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter's purpose is to justify how the data was obtained and analysed to address the research question 'What is the role and experiences of practicing PAs in an Irish FE College? and sub questions:

- Who are PAs? (Exploring Background, Motivation, Values, and Identity)

- What is their work environment, (including, working conditions, and status)?

- What are the role and responsibilities of the PA in the Irish FE Sector?

- What are the PA experiences? (Understanding their perception of their impact /role).

The aim of the study that is to share the stories and experiences of practicing PAs in an Irish FE college and to achieve this aim, narrative inquiry was chosen, the rationale for choice of methodology and reasonable steps taken are discussed below.

3.2 Research Paradigms and Philosophical Underpinning

Creswell & Kasmad (2020, p.19) state "a paradigm is a basic set of beliefs that guide action" (Guba, 1990, p.17). The narrative approach is positioned within the interpretive qualitative paradigm (Gudmundsdottir, 1997, 2001, as cited in Moen, 2006, p.5) as interpretive researchers hold a firm belief that reality is socially constructed (Nguyen & Thi Le Thanh, 2015, p.25), shared meanings and experience through a social means. Narrative inquiry is being used more commonly in research as the years go by, however, it is still relevantly new within interpretivism research (Moen, 2006, p.2). Aforementioned, the

narrative approach falls under the interpretive research method (Gudmundsdottir, 1997, 2001 as cited in Moen, 2006, p.5) and Interpretivism strives to gather and interpret data by making sense of people's experiences. Therefore, the chosen method of narrative interviewing fits well within the interpretivist paradigm as it provides an opportunity for relationships to form during the interviewing process through a collaborative means and allowed me to inquire into the stories told by PAs.

In the 1990's, Clandinin & Connelly (2000 as cited in Clandinin, 20006, p.46) first used narrative inquiry which is influenced by Dewey's theory of experience by introducing the "three dimensions of the metaphoric narrative inquiry space", the first was "the personal and social (interactions), secondly "past, present, future (continuity) and, thirdly place (situation)" (Clandinin, 2006, p.47). Cheng (2016, p.1) explains 'the three dimensions' in a complex form by stating a person's experience is influenced by their past experiences which involve encounters with others (socially), in a particular surrounding thus, situation. Clandinin & Connelly (2006) hold a firm belief that narratives or stories happen within the three dimensions (Lindsay & Schwind, 2016, p.15). Narrative inquiry, therefore, presents the holistic view of a person's experiences and contributing factors to those experiences, for example, a storybook will set the scene by providing characters (social), context (situation) and provides a background with many stories beginning with the words 'once upon a time' (continuity). Narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to capture the whole story from the participants using 'the three dimensions' as a framework and to make sense or inquire into the stories told by participants. This framework allowed me to consider the personal experiences of PAs but also their interaction with staff and students again, linking to sub questions. It also links to the theorical underpinning of this study, see below.

3.3 Narrative Inquiry & Rationale for Narrative in this research

To begin, it is important that we address the question of narrative inquiry, '*what is narrative inquiry?'* Narrative inquiry "is a form of qualitative research in which stories are shared and the stories themselves become the raw data" (Butina, 2015, p. 190). The researcher then makes inquiries into the stories told by participants. Narratives surround us every day, Kohler Riessman (2008) argues there is "nowhere that is without a narrative, its simply there, like life itself" (p.4). Narratives are evident throughout history where drawings outlined a form of communication and prompt storytelling as people were illiterate. It is clear society has changed with educational opportunities being accessible and most people are now able to read and write. We are still surrounded by narratives as everything tells a story, for instance, a painting, a dance, or a stained-glass window (Kohler Riessman, 2008) all of which portray a story.

A narrative can be thought of as "a story of a sequence of events" which represents a "storied experience" (Josselson, 2010, p.2). In agreement with Josselson, Kohler Riessman (2008) also views narratives as stories that contain a natural sequence of events or order and occasionally may have unexpected events that follow up with human reaction (p.6). Life can bring many unexpected events which makes each induvial story unique.

This study is associated with the experiences of practicing PAs in a FE College in Ireland. As the research is concerned with the notion of 'experience', a narrative inquiry approach is best suited to answering the research question as the participants are encouraged to share stories through their experiences as PAs. Narrative inquiry can be noted as a "way of understanding experience" (Clendenin & Caine, 2008, p. 542). I want to understand and gain insights into the experiences of PAs and their role within the FE college, so that I can

improve my own practice. Narrative inquiry allowed me to learn from and listen to the stories told by the participants. Connelly & Clandinin (1990, as cited in Moen, 2006, p. 2) argue that narrative research allows participants to share stories as "all human beings are storytellers who individually and socially lead storied lives". As human beings, we tend to share stories through conversations in which people set the context by being descriptive just like a story. Narrative inquiry also allows the researcher to collect a series of events in the form of stories from the participants which are based on their own experiences and perspectives as PAs in an FE college.

Several different methodologies were considered at the planning stage of this study, quantitative studies lack human experience and emotion, for example, a survey does not allow me to have that emotional connection with the participants. A phenomenological study was considered within the qualitative approach as it reflected elements of experience and as Creswell 1998 (cited in Moen 2008) stated it has a "narrative form of representation" (p.2). This approach was strongly considered but it lacked the notion of stories. Narrative inquiry was chosen as it is concerned with the notion of stories, using this approach presented me with an opportunity to hear from PAs themselves about their role which has been in existence for 17 years and there is a huge lack of data in the FE context. Simply, there is a lack of clarity about the PA role in general and narrative inquiry allowed me to gather data based on the experiences of PAs that can feed into future research in the sector with PAs viewpoints, experiences, and stories at the forefront of the study. The narrative approach allowed for more detailed insights into the role and experiences of PAs. As this is exploratory research, understanding perspectives of PAs from the front line can lead to a greater understanding from within the FE sector.

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3.4 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework was used as a guide to help shape the study, that being the 'bioecological model' by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), this theory sets out to explain different levels of society that influence human development (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017, p.2). The levels are interlinked or nested surrounding the individual in the middle of the system. The four systems are "Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, and Macrosystem" (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017, p.2) and later the Chronosystem was added. The microsystem is the layer closest to the individual containing immediate family, friends, school/ work environment, and home environment.

The mesosystem contains connections and relationships that we as human beings form with one another. Moving further away from the individual or labelled 'child' according to the image below, the exosystem involves indirect contact but affects the individual, an example being the media. The macrosystem involves the cultural views in society and the chronosystem represents 'the passage of time' (Hess & Schutlz, 2008, p. 61). The layers are all connected because they can each impact the individual at the centre of the system. To put this into context with PAs at the centre of the system, the microsystem involves their place of work (context), colleagues and home life. The mesosystem is the connections and relationships that PAs may form with students and colleagues in the work environment. The exosystem extends to the media and information shared via the internet which links directly to the lack of information on PAs within society and the policies of ETB's which will have a direct impact on PAs and teaching staff. Macrosystem involves cultural and societal views, an example, the increase of students attending higher education is encouraged by society therefore, PA positions may increase. The last stage is the chronosystem which outlines the changes reflected in society overtime. An obvious one as mentioned in the literature review,

is the view of disability over time with the shift away from the medical model of disability to the social model of disability (Dawn, 2021) and how changes in educational systems allow students to attend higher educational opportunities as societal morals and values has changed.
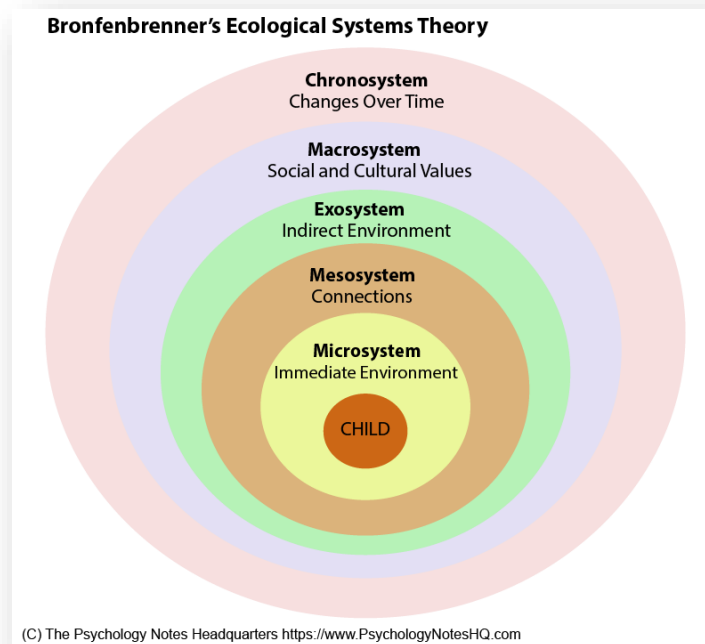

Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Image adapted from "The psychology Notes Headquarters, 2022. Retrieved from What is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory? - The Psychology Notes Headquarters (psychologynoteshq.com)

This theoretical framework undeniably links directly to Dewey's theory of experience and more recently Clandinin & Connelly's (2000) theory of 'the three dimensions. Dewey was concerned with the social element to human experience (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p.542), Bronfenbrenner highlighted the importance of relationships in the mesosystem stage (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017, p.3) that can impact us as human beings. Bronfenbrenner's theory reflects that of Clandinin & Connelly's (2000) theory of 'the three dimensions' as it draws on

the impact of 'situation' by referring to the environments and context, 'continuity' as the chronosystem refers to the past, present, and future changes over time and 'interactions' which Bronfenbrenner's systems highlight as essential in a person's life (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017, p.3, Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p.543-545).

This theoretical framework proved to be well suited as the backbone to this study as it linked directly with the theoretical underpinnings of narrative inquiry. It provides a lens for looking at interactions in a 3D space. It also links to the aspect of context and environments which I aim to explore as part of the exploration into the PAs working environment using this model as a prompt during the interviewing process and formation of the sub questions. The framework allows me to explore the wider systems that directly impact PAs at work such as the values and culture of society and within the FE college; the theory will allow me to actively explore the interlinking systems surrounding PAs.

3.5 Methods

This section aims to offer a justification for the chosen method of narrative inquiry and how this method informed the overall process of narrative interviewing using a semi structured narrative approach.

Interviewing is commonly used in narrative inquiry (Butina, 2015, p.193) as it offers the best way to gather in-depth information from the participants. According to Kohler Riessman (2008, p.23) "The goal in narrative interviewing is to generate detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements". Detailed accounts allowed the participants to share stories based on their life and the role of a PA. Narrative interviewing was considered the best way to obtain detailed data as it encouraged the art of storytelling. As human beings,

we naturally tell stories through conversation by setting the context, drawing on characters, and following a structure of start, middle, and end (Butina, 2015 & Kohler Riessman, 2008) which links to the works Dewey and Bronfenbrenner. The participants were made aware that the stories they told would not be done so in vain, but I was genuinely interested in what they had to say about their life and role as a practicing PA in an FE college in Ireland.

3.5.1 Developing the interview questions

The interview questions were developed in line with the research question and the sub questions that are being used to shape and guide the overall study. The questions were also developed with Bronfenbrenner's framework to inform lines of inquiry, information was sought on the PA working conditions, environment, interactions and perceptions of their role.

The PAs and I co-constructed the interview questions using the sub questions as a tool. I wanted the PAs to be actively involved in the development of the interview questions because this is a study about them. I asked the PAs to help me develop the interview questions as no one knows their role and experiences better than they do. From the literature review it was clear that their voice was missing from research and I wanted this study to showcase their voices. This was done through a collaborative means, we gathered around a table and engaged in a brain storming session, see appendix, iii. Engaging in this process allowed me to build the interviewing questions on the foundation of the PAs experiences, thus reflecting a narrative approach to research. Each PA shared ideas and we developed the prompt question sheet as seen in the appendix, iv. Their voice is evident in the construction of the interviewing tool and not just in the findings of this study. Ethical consideration was given throughout the process where I set boundaries in regards to confidentiality to ensure anonymity was upheld. The developed interview questions were used as a prompt, but not set

in stone because sharing stories provided the researcher with more information, simply put, a fixed set of questions could not provide detailed insights or produce stories. The participants were encouraged to go off track and to set a new trail in which I, as the researcher followed (Kohler Riessman, 2008, p.24). If needed, I brought the participants back to the focus of the study using my prompt questions, My role was to interrupt stories told by PAs and this links to an interpretive paradigm which underpins the study. The interviewing questions were used as a prompt to guide PAs to particular events but I maintained flexibility that allowed the stories to unfold.

3.5.2 Interview Design

The interview process consists of a semi-structured narrative approach with open-ended questions. According to Wasikiewicz-Firlej, (2020, p.311) Semi-structured narrative interviews tend to have fewer questions that "set the scene" and involve the art of listening. The semi-structured narrative approach seemed best suited to the overall research study as it provides an opportunity for me to gather data on relevant themes that emerged from the literature review but also gave a sense of direction to the participants and I. The PA job description was used as a tool to prompt discussion surrounding the PAs expected roles and responsibilities, see appendix v. It was discovered that some PAs do not re-call seeing the job description before and to combat that, I gave each PA time to read it before the interviews and of course, during the interview, but actually it worked well presenting the job description earlier as the PAs made notes along the job description and highlighted any concerns they had and discussed the points during the interview.

Unstructured narrative interviews were considered as another relevant approach however, it required little to no structure giving the researcher no control over the topic of

discussion (Kohler Riessman, 2008), this approach could simply not have worked as I wanted to gain insights into my research question which is extremely specific seeking the practicing role of a PA. The semi-structured narrative approach allowed me to direct the participant back to the research question. This approach does allow the participants to go off-topic and direct their own paths whilst also, allowing for me to gently bring them back to the open-ended set of questions I prepared for the interview, for this reason, semi-structured narrative interviews were chosen.

3.5.3 Interview Process

As the interviews were an hour-long, I worked around the participant timetables. The timetables are set out for the year meaning the participants knew exactly when they were free to part take in the interviewing process, however, my work timetable did not suit all participant's time and for that reason, a schedule of interview times was drawn up to facilitate everyone, appendix xii. The interviews were concluded with six PAs. They were in-person interviews that took place in the sensory room and lasted for just under one hour each.

The best and most effective way to gather the collection of stories was through audio-recorded interviews. A recording device was used to capture the data which was then uploaded to NCI cloud storage where a secure folder was created to store the audios, the folder was password protected that is stored for five years. When recording, I made sure the audio device was located nicely between the PA and I, as I wanted a clear recording and that would help at data analysis stage. I then used the 'dictate' feature on word which typed up what PAs and I said automatically, essentially during the interview the transcribing phase begun however, I did have to listen to each interview recording and re-typed some parts as dictate did not notice everything the PAs said.

I kept a field journal during the study and captured the hidden descriptions and emotions that audio could not identify as Clandinin &Connelly (1989) states we should "record field notes of participants' observations as there is an interpretive quality that enters into the notes that we keep' (p. 7). The field journal presented with many benefits to help me throughout the interviewing process as it allowed me to uncover the true emotions of PAs. The raw reactions from certain questions such as pay and PA roles were documented. The reactions proved to be useful at the data analysis stage that helped to shed light on confusions around the job description, see appendix xi.

3.5.4 Pilot interview

A pilot interview was conducted with a PA, this was a test run to ensure the questions were understandable and transparent. Majid et al. (2017) suggests ""piloting for interviews is crucial to test the questions and to gain some practice in interviewing" (p.1073). After the pilot interview, the PA asked if a copy of the interviewing questions could be printed off and given to all PAs before the interview and, this was something I felt was not right, it can take away from the story element however, some changes were made to the questions following the pilot as suggested by the PA; two questions were very alike and one caused some confusion and so, I combined both questions to avoid any confusion for the upcoming interviews.

The pilot interview allowed me to practice using my recording device and the 'dictate' feature on Microsoft word, something that I was nervous about, this interview allowed me to encounter unanticipated issues, one being full storage on my recording device that was soon cleared in light of the practice run. A reflection of the pilot interview and moderations are in the appendix section of the study, xi.

3.5.5 Interviewing Environment

The interviewing process took place in the sensory room which is geared towards students who have additional needs, and the participants spend a lot of time there. The sensory room is filled with lights, lava lamps, bean bags, and dim lights to create a soft, relaxing environment for the students. I thought the sensory room would be ideal for the interviews as it is quiet, and the participants may feel more at ease.

Figure 3: Sensory room with dimmed lights and white light cube.
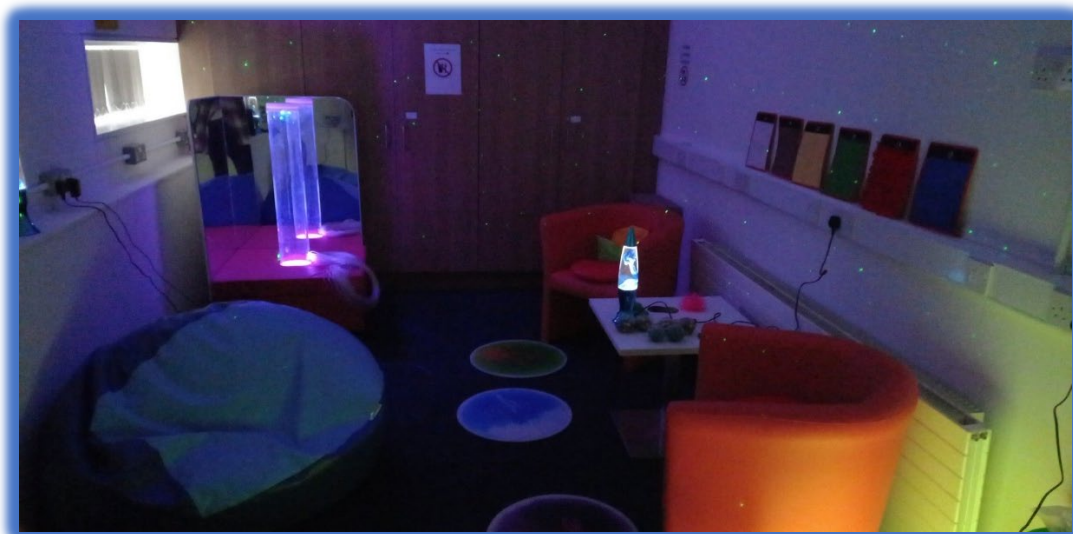
Figure 4: Sensory room with natural light and yellow-toned light cube.

The interviews were carried out as seen in figure 4. Natural light was required for the researcher to read her interview questions. The Participants had a choice to sit on the bean bags or orange armchair and were encouraged to get comfortable before the interview began.

3.6 Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used when selecting participants for this study, also known as, "convenience sampling in that respondents are chosen subjectively" (Lavrakas, et al. 2019, p.422). To select the participants for the study an inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed to identify what was required in order to take part in the research study. Both the inclusion and exclusion criteria were created to identify members of staff in the Irish FE college who are employed as PAs only. The exclusion criteria outlined that no one other than that of a PA employed in this particular FE college may participate in this study. PAs can participate in this study regardless of how many years or months they have spent in their current role.

In order to recruit the participants, I created a poster outlining the title of the study and my contact details (see appendix, i). The poster was displayed in the PA room as it was directly aimed at all PAs. There are nine PAs currently employed in the FE college, all of which are invited to participate in the study. Once interest was expressed, an information sheet and consent form were sent to the participant via email, and they were required to read the forms and to fill out a short survey outlining their understanding of the study to ensure transparency (see appendix ii). The participants were sent a paper copy and a digital copy of both the information sheet and consent form as some participants preferred the physical copy.

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When consent was granted by all participants, a thank you email was sent, and suitable interviewing times were discussed with participants. I worked around the participant's routine and accommodated all participants with a provisional time and date for the interview. I did this using an excel sheet, once finalised, I sent the induvial times to the participants.

The participant's involvement is essential to this research as they are encouraged to part take in an interview where they share their experiences and stories about their current position as a PA in Ireland.

A pen picture graph was developed for the six PAs taking part in this study, it documents gender, experience and background of PAs. The PAs are all Irish females aged between 25- 50 years of age who come from similar educational backgrounds. Josie has been in this line of work for 17 years with the newest members of staff being there just 10 months.

Gender	Fictional Name	Age	Years as PA	Educational Background
Female	Ella	42	11 years	Education and Training, level 8
Female	Jasmine	40	2 years	QQI level 6 childcare and healthcare
Female	Josie	50	17 years	QQI level 5 childcare
Female	Lilly	43	2 years	Education and Training, level 8

Female	Tia	32	10 months	QQI level 6 childcare and level 5 in healthcare
Female	Aria	25	10 months	Education and Training, level 8

Figure 5: A pen picture graph

3.7 Data Analysis

Narrative inquiry is associated with content such as what is spoken, written, or images presenting a visual inquiry however, in thematic analysis, the content is the "exclusive factor" (Kohler Riessman, 2008, p.54). Researching previous studies that used narrative inquiry along with thematic analysis was explored to gain ideas and insights to how the study was carried out and so I became familiar with Gareth Williams and his study regarding 'illness'. (Kohler Riessman, 2008, p.56), he noted thematic analysis was best suited to narrative as it allowed for interpretation of transcripts (Kohler Riessman, 2008, p.58), just like Williams, I wanted to inquiry into the raw data.

According to Braun & Clarke (2006, p.6) "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data". Thematic analysis offers itself to narrative researchers who want to gain insights into the spoken language obtained, Kohler Riessman (2008, p.58) refers to this as 'narrative thematic analyses. Kohler Riessman's (2008, p.58) approach to thematic analysis was explored however, Braun & Clarke's (2006) approach was preferred because it allowed me to become familiar with the data and find the hidden elements that may be present in the large data set, it also gave me a

sense of structure using the six-phase process (see below figure 6) that provided me with a sequence of events in which I completed in a rigor's manner, discussed under the following sub heading.
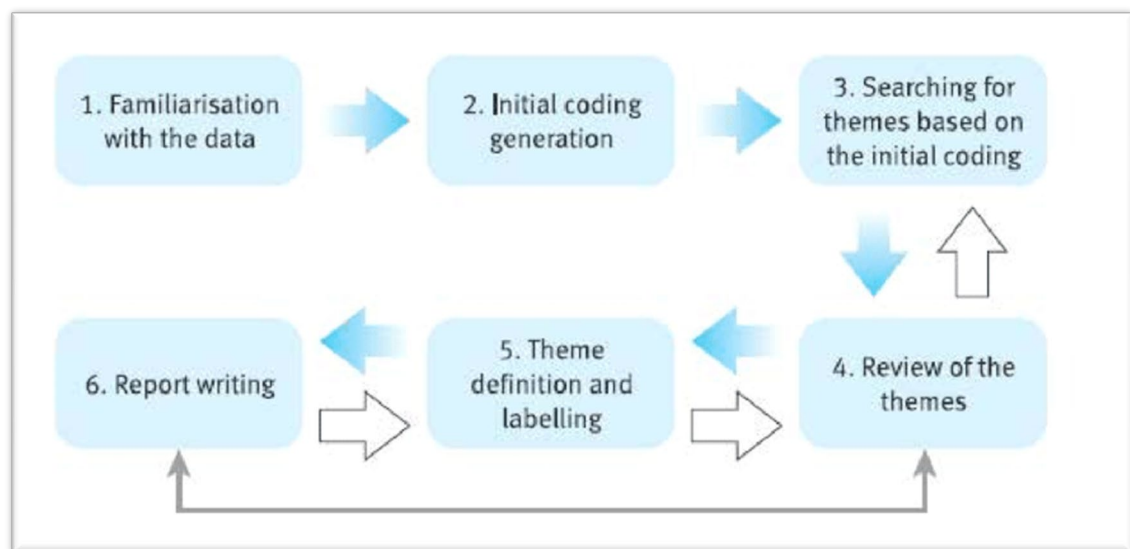
3.7.1 Data analysis and Interview transcripts

Figure 6: Howitt & Cramer (2011) Braun & Clarkes model of thematic analysis (2006) [image] by Research gate. Braun & Clarke 's model of thematic analysis (Howitt & Cramer, 2011) | Download Scientific Diagram (researchgate.net)

I used this process as a guide when conducting thematic analysis. Phase one involved listening to all participant's recordings and transcribing them accurately. I made sure to read the interview transcripts so that I became familiar with the data and documented interesting pieces of text along the side of the document, see appendix, vii. Phase two involved coding, according to Braun & Clarke (2012, p.61) "Codes identify and provide a label for a feature of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question". Longer interviews are associated

with narrative inquiry therefore transcripts are longer, the coding section of this model was very helpful at this stage. Codes were identified from the text using a colour coding system as it proved to be more effective in terms of organisation. I used a word document and inserted the codes into a box with relevant participant quotes beside them, I did it this way for two reasons, number 1, made it easier to obtain the quotes for the next chapter, and number 2, allowed me to see how many times a code reappeared, see code box viii.

Phase three was applied in which I constructed themes and associated the codes with the themes, Braun & Clarke (2012, p.63) state that the hunt for themes is "an active process, meaning we generate themes rather than discover them". I constructed the themes based on the research questions, codes uncovered within the text and with Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) in mind. I grouped codes together which shared similarities and from this, I started to apply labels thereby, forming potential themes. Deciding on the final themes was straightforward with the help of Braun & Clarkes (2006) six steps of thematic analysis. I used the six steps as a guide, and they led me through the selection process. 17 potential themes emerged from the data set, of which I strongly considered Using 'Miro' I mapped out the 17 themes and applied codes in line with the themes and I noticed many themes overlapped therefore I grouped those themes together. Phase Four and five involved the reviewing of themes to ensure rigor. I reviewed each theme by ensuring that codes were reflected in the chosen theme and that the theme itself reflected the research question. Finally, in line with the research questions, sub questions and aim of the study, four final themes were chosen. The sixth stage involves the write-up, the themes are explored in depth in the next chapter. The process is documented in the appendix section.

Like most approaches, there are limitations associated with thematic analysis. Gibson (2006, as cited in Javadi & Zarea (2016, p,39), argues that the researcher may only pay

attention to reoccurring phrases or words which may impact the process. I made sure not to concentrate only on remerging items as I was aware it may impact the overall results of the study. I discussed such issues within my 'critical friends' group' and made use of reflective journaling throughout the analysis process to ensure I addressed any bias whilst creating themes.

As the researcher, I am aware of the limitations that exist with narrative inquiry research. For starters, narrative inquiry is a qualitative study and therefore, fewer participants works best as 'extensive information' must be obtained (Butina, 2015, p.196). Narrative interviews are usually 40 minutes or more, there is a longer data analysis process that must be done, and this may be time-consuming (Butina, 2005, Creswell & Kasmad, 2020). Time can be an issue as this is a short study therefore, it was a race against time however, despite that narrative inquiry allowed me to obtain stories rich in data that simply could not have been obtained using another methodology and therefore, limitations did not shake this study.

3.7.2 Ethical Considerations

As the researcher, I ensured ethical responsibility was adhered to as it is my obligation to protect each participant. I followed the principles of ethics put forward by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) as it provided clear steps on how to carry out an ethical study. Before commencement of the study, consent was sought from the chosen FE college in which the researcher is employed. The principal granted permission by signing and stamping the consent sheet also.

An information sheet was given to all participants that outlined the inner workings of the study, the title of the study, and their involvement in the study ensuring transparency. The

information sheet contained a brief survey that ensured the participants understood the details of the study. The information sheet outlined that all parties had a right to withdraw at any time from the study and no pressure would be applied, this includes any data previously obtained. Howitt and Cramer (2020, p.167) state, this is a "voluntary contract that drawn up by the researcher to protect the personal information of participants involved". In this study, the voluntary contract takes the form of the consent sheet as no one was forced to participate in the study, and freedom of choice was a core principle throughout. Informed consent allows participants to make rational decisions that affect them, giving them freedom opportunity, and choice (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979). The consent of all participants was required to state they understood the information sheet which outlined the key details of their involvement within the study.

During the interviewing process, pseudonyms were applied to protect the participant's identity ensuring anonymity. The audio recordings from the interviewing process may be potentially identifiable based on the voice of the participants and the stories they may tell. The transcripts consisted of a 'fictionalising approach' where fictional names are provided to exercise the participant's right to anonymity (BERA, 2018, p.21). There is a potential risk that students may be identifiable in terms of the extended stories therefore, fictional names were given protecting confidentiality.

Data protection was considered an ethical issue as I had audio recordings obtained from the interviewing process. In line with the NCI guidelines, all audio recordings are stored on NCI cloud storage for five years and destroyed after. The file was in a zip lock folder with a passcode for extra security. Only the researcher had access to the file ensure confidentiality in line with the GPDR guidelines which ensures the protection of personal data and places the responsibility on the researcher to ensure they protect the data obtained by the study (Office

of Government Procurement 2018, p.3 & EPSU, 2018). The participants have been made aware the completed thesis would be available in the NCI library.

I am currently employed in this FE college as a PA and, this meant that I needed to question my role here as the researcher, colleague and my own bias as a PA. I have my own bias and perceptions of the role, this was kept in check throughout the research by engaging with reflective journaling, see appendix xi. I acknowledged the importance of potential bias particularly in 'insider research'. Simmel (1950, as cited in Saidin & Yaacob, 2016, p.850) states it may be difficult for the researcher to be "natural" and act "blindsided" as an insider is close to the study and so, I took measures to ensure I presented the extended narrative showing participants words and showcasing their voice, I made clear the areas where interpreted their narratives.

3.7.3 Relationships

Ethical concerns in narrative research stem from the idea of a 'dual role', a close relationship is formed with the participants but also being aware of the responsibility I have as the researcher is essential, the balance of both contributes to an effective narrative study (Josselson, 2007, p. 538).

The relationship between the participants and the researcher in narrative research is essential.Wasikiewicz-Firlej (2020) outline the importance of relationship-building in narrative research by stating interviewers "must be particularly skilled in building rapport by being attentive" (p.311). In agreement with Wasikiewicz-Firlej (2020), Kohler Riessman (2008) states that traditional ways of interviewing where the interviewer is viewed as a 'facilitator' are generated to ask a set list of questions, and a participant is viewed as a

'vessel' who directly responds to the questions are replaced by a more active and connective means. Furthermore, he highlights the active participation between both researcher (interviewer) and participant who "jointly construct narrative and meaning" (p.23). I was actively involved by taking an interest in the stories told by participants. I used active listening throughout and expressed interest through body language.

As I work with the participants in a professional environment, I have formed a professional relationship with the participants which is essential and necessary as this is a qualitative piece of research. Malfrid et al. (2016) state that the distance of relationship between both parties (researcher and participants) should be 'minimised' and the separateness of both should not be evident (p.1). Malfrid et al. (2016) make a valid argument as people tend to break down their walls if they feel comfortable enough to do so, the relationship-building in this study is important as narrative inquiry highlights the need for people to be open to generate stories thus, gather data.

3.7.4 Trustworthiness

Conducting a trustworthy and quality study was of the greatest importance. Nowell et al. (2017, p.2) outline the researcher's responsibility to ensure "a rigor and trustworthiness" by acknowledging the power of data analysis because if this aspect of the study is unclear, it may lead to the reader's conclusion of 'untrustworthy' (Nowell et al., 2017, p.2). I made sure the data analysis section was transparent and complex by adhering to the six phases of thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke, (see figure 6) which intends to reflect the trustworthiness criteria put forward by Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017, p.3).

Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017, p.3) criteria on trustworthiness in research involved key areas of "credibility, transferability, dependability,

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and confirmability' to coincide with the quantitative criteria of "validity and reliability" (Nowell et al., 2017, p.3). Credibility was addressed within this study as I engaged with peer debriefing in the form of a 'critical friends' group', by doing this offered a fresh perspective from an outsider on the process of the study boosting credibility (Nowell et al., 2017, p.3). Transferability refers to "the generalization of inquiry" (Nowell et al., 2017, p.3). As there is a lack of literature and data surrounding PAs in FE colleges, the findings section may be transferred beyond this study. Dependability is another well-thought-out area. Nowell et al. (2017, p.3) outline in order "to achieve dependability, researchers can ensure the research process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004). To ensure the project is dependable, I conducted an 'Audit Trail' (See Appendix) put forward by Lincoln & Guba (1985). This allowed me to produce evidence of interview transcripts, codes, themes, and decision-making process (Nowell et al., 2017, p.3). Confirmability was achieved as the findings and discussion were reviewed numerous times to ensure that the themes reflected the interview transcripts (Nowell et al., 2017, p.3).

3.8 My positioning in the study

The researcher within a qualitative approach has an active role in the research, they tend to get involved by getting to know their participants (Thanh & Thi Le Thanh, 2015, p.26), they strive to dimmish the pre-existing gap by establishing a partnership between themselves and participants in the study, however, not all researchers who conducted a piece of narrative inquiry agree on paving the gap between both parties, Seidman (1991, as cited in Kanno 1997, p. 5) argues that such a relationship needs to be controlled however, Wasikiewicz-Firlej (2020, p.311) disagrees with Seidman as narrative inquiry should consist of a 'respectful and attentive relationship'. Narrative researchers should involve a

collaborative process that cannot be done overnight, it takes time to build a rapport (Wasikiewicz-Firlej, 2020, p.311). For me, the relationship between myself and PAs was already established as I work in the chosen environment and they are my colleagues, I was always professional but did draw on that pre-existing relationship to build trust and prompt conversation. I have already formed a relationship with the participants as stated previously.

My position in this study is that of *an insider* again, acknowledging that I work with the participants five days a week as a personal assistant to PLC students. I have existing knowledge of the role of a PA and the context in which they work. Raheim et al. (2016, p.2) highlight the notion of "role conflict being related to both an insider and outsider" in research, stating that a researcher must be clear on their positionality throughout the study or role conflict may occur. It was essential for me to establish my positionality as an insider in this study as I know the participants on a personal and professional level and I have an interest in the chosen topic. I made it clear I wanted to hear their stories about their role and experience of being a PA as if I never heard them before. I was concerned at the start that the participants may not share a story with me that they shared previously and that is why I was completely clear on my positioning during the interview.

Over the past serval years, there has been a 'reflective turn in qualitative research' (Raheim et al., 2016, p.1). Raheim et al. (2016, p.1) "Reflexivity concerns thoughtful, analytic self-awareness of researchers' experiences, reasoning, and overall impact throughout the research process". Self-awareness was essential during this study, to become self-aware, I engaged in reflective journaling where personal accounts were noted (Appendix, xi). Axiological reasoning (Creswell & Kasmad, 2020, p. 17) was explored by noting my values. Bias and judgments throughout the study. I have also engaged in a 'critical friends' group' as part of my college course where aspects of the dissertation were discussed and revised

together. Regular meetings were held between my dissertation supervisor and I, to ensure I was on track with the research project. These steps were taken to not element my bias but to accept that I have pre-existing biases and to be more aware of them in the study.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an outline of the chosen methodological approach and overarching paradigm. The interview process allowed me to gather rich insights into the roles and experiences of PAs. Narrative inquiry presented me with an opportunity to hear from practicing PAs in an Irish FE college where I inquired into the data set. On completion of the data analysis process, in line with thematic analysis put forward by Braun & Clarke's (2006) four final themes were generated. The theme and results will be presented in the succeeding chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter captures the stories and experiences of PAs in a FE college in Ireland. There was a wealth of data, and I cannot share every story so, each story that was chosen was done so after careful consideration thus, reflecting the objectives of the study, the research question, and sub-questions. Following the final step of Braun & Clarkes (2006) thematic analysis model 'define and name themes', four final themes were chosen that best represented the research question and guided by the sub-questions, aforementioned in the above chapter, the chosen themes are:

Theme One Motivation and Sustainability in the profession	Theme Two Role changes and uncertainty
Theme Three Concerns: status and recognition	Theme Four Experiences: joys, frustrations, challenges and the future trajectory

Figure 7: The Four Final Themes

4.2 Motivation and Sustainability in the profession

A key part of this research is to understand PA's motivation and sustainability in the role. From the analysis of data, role attraction, flexibility and career progression came through as key themes. I was interested in the motivational factors that contributed to the entry routes to the PA position and what essentially keeps them in the profession. This theme is very much linked with sub-question one, 'who are PAs? (Exploring Background, Motivation, Values and Identity). The background was explored in terms of previous employment and training. The motivation behind choice of employment and motivation to stay in the role was largely associated with the formation of PA student relationships. Values and Identity were addressed in terms of considerations for work/ life balance.

4.2.1 Motivation: role attraction and flexibility

I asked the PAs, 'what led you to this role?'. I asked this question simply because it had never been asked before, and actually, what I found was PAs got the position by chance. The notion of becoming a PA by chance was mentioned by Josie and Ella who share very similar stories, both studying in the FE college where this study is taking place, they were asked by different people in both managerial roles if they would like a PA position. Here's Ela's story,

See, I was studying in the college at the time, my level 5 in healthcare and then I was also working in the hospital as a healthcare assistant and the vice principle at the time just rang me and said there was a PA role going and would I like It. I wasn't actively looking for something else, but the hours were better here **(Ella)**

Ella and Josie attended the college as students before becoming a PA. What is fascinating here is that they essentially trained in the college themselves and soon after become employed, both of which studied courses that have a caring or supporting element. It can be said we have a glimpse of Ella and Josie's characteristics as they appear to have a caring nature and it was this caring nature that led them to the role of a PA.

The role as a flexible position that allows for PAs to facilitate childminding duties was mentioned by two PAs as another reason, they took on the PA role. It was found, PAs follow a school calendar and therefore, are off when schools are off, Lilly explains there is no need for a childminder because she too is off during the school breaks,

I have a little boy at home so he comes first and being a PA allowed me to work suitable hours and still be there for him when he comes home from school. I don't need a childminder because I am off when he is off, summer holidays, Christmas holidays so it suits me just fine, I really can't complain. **(Lilly)**

The idea of managing family life was a determining factor for the choice of employment by two PAs and, the PA position makes allowances for the balance between work life and family life, one of the main reasons for two PAs as they have small children at home. PAs mentioned balancing work life and family life as being 'doable' because of the time off during school breaks that allowed for them to focus on their personal responsibilities and just this year, 'the work life balance and miscellaneous provisions bill' was discussed by members of Cabinet, the purpose is to identify the essential element of work duties and caring or parenting duties (RTE, 2022). It is clear people are seeking roles that allow a work, family life balance and the PA role provides just that.

4.2.2 Career progression

Career progression was outlined as another pathway to employment, two PAs worked in a childcare setting for many years as an SNA, and both, outlined how they saw the PA role as a pathway to progression, working with adults in a FE college was something they expressed interest in. What is interesting here from Jasmine is that she felt her age was against her in the SNA role, expressing concern for her lack of energy to care for children and this pushed her to look for alternative roles that catered to teenagers or adults who need support in an educational setting,

> I worked as an SNA for 10 years in a childcare setting, I reached a limit, childcare is a job that that has a limit, you know, I ran out of energy and I was looking for other opportunities that involved the caring aspect, I remember seeing this role being advertised, like I mean it's right up my street, working with those who have disabilities, in adult education, it was to me, a step up, in my line of work. (***Jasmine)***

What I am seeing here is that Jasmine was seeking alternative opportunities that still contain the caring or supporting element. The PA role was appealing to her because it is a comparable role and this was explored in the literature review (Hendrick, et al., & Logan, 2006) where it became clear that both SNAs and PAs share some similar roles, so this was not a shocking finding that PAs once came from a SNA position however, what is interesting is the idea that both Tia and Jasmine outline the PA role as progression from an SNA role, this may be due to the different age groups that they cater too, as Jasmine said, working with children can led to energy burnout and paraphs, the FE college provides teenagers and adults that need different types of supports.

4.2.3 Motivation in the profession

Motivation to stay in the role was another area I was interested in as the researcher, what I found was that all PAs stay in the role because of the impact they have on students' retention and performance. Lilly explains the reason she gets up in the morning is because of the students and the essential support PAs provide to the students in terms of assignments,

> You find motivation every day in this role and it comes in different shapes and sizes, just like the students and when you see a student who turns up for class or turns up for their appointments with the PA, and you can help them overcome the challenges that they have with assignments, so to produce really good work and achieve their potential and it's a sense of pride I feel, they need us, that's what motivates me and that's why I get up every morning and come here to be with the PAs too, we are a team. (**Lilly**)

PAs stay in the role because they see themselves as a support system for the students. They are there to support and encourage their students throughout the year. Interestingly, Lilly mentions the idea of 'sense of pride' in the role, this alone is a motivational factor for Lilly as a PA in this FE college. She is motivated by the students, to push them to achieve their full potential, and that, also reflects on the PAs as they seem to be dictated as they acknowledge they have a vital role to play in these students' lives.

Josie states her motivation to stay in the role stems from the student relationships. When speaking about the students at graduation, noting that she feels partly responsible for getting them to that place, "I just feel so proud when I see the students at graduation, you know, I feel like I helped them to get them there" **(Josie).** Appleberg (2005, as cited in Mas-Machuca et al., 2016) outline experiencing pride at work influences the employee 'decision'

to stay in the role and 'stimulates the employee commitment', it can be said job sustainability is embedded in PA student relationships.

Exploring motivation and sustainability in the profession has provided insights into the reasoning behind the choice of position. Most PAs who have children at home, have chosen the PA position enabling them to balance their family life and professional life with set times off during the academic year with little need for childminders. The motivation to stay in the role stems from the PA student relationships were PAs act as a support system to these students to enable them to reach their full potential.

4.3 Theme Two: Role Changes and Uncertainty

A key part of this research is to gain an understanding of the role and experiences of practicing PAs, the perceived role of a PA, being that of the job description was used as a tool in this stud. From the data analysis, key findings emerged that being the role changes associated with the PA position and a title change from SNA to PA. Considering the job description, the roles and responsibilities of a PA are mapped out despite this, the role of a PA is not well defined leading to a sense of uncertainty.

4.3.1 Title and Role changes

The first finding uncovers the evolving role of a PA through three time periods, the year 2005, 2011, and 2022 will be discussed and changes noted. Exploring the three time periods links to the notion of continuity in the three dimensions outlined by Clandinin & Connelly (2000, as cited in Clandinin, 2006, p.46) where the past and present role of a PA is explored.

The year 2005 cropped up as an unpredictable finding, Josie mentions after five years of employment as an SNA; the title was changed to PA without reason despite duties

remaining the same for the following year. Josie, the longest PA shared her story about the

change from SNA to PA and how the title changed but it did not reflect the role,

> I started here in 2005, that makes me the longest PA in the role now (laughs), I
> was one of three PAs, Oh, Well, I mean, we were taking on as an SNA, and then like
> five years into it, then they changed the role from SNA which was same duties as any
> secondary school and then changed it to a PA (laughs), for what though, like it was
> the same duties you know, like my contract was changed, less pay and entitlements
> taken away, you know pension and all. As the years went along the role changed
> every year nearly, every couple of years it changed. **(Josie)**

This was a surprising finding that opened up a whole different perspective, seeking

this newly emerged information from the FE governing body, it was found that they provide

SNAs and PAs to ETBs, the question here is 'why was the title changed from SNA to PAs if

the title is still being used in the sector today?', the title SNA does not seem to be discounted

as the governing body website has referred to the term SNA on their website that was updated

last year ("Governing Body", 2021). The duties of an SNA in 2005 was to work with fewer

students providing physical support. Josie shares her experience,

> When I first started, I actually worked with these two students who were in
> wheelchairs, So basically, we did help them with the bathroom stuff like that and then
> also helped them academically as they had learning difficulties. Just think about it
> like, I had two students only attending the room and now there are over 100 students
> attending the PA room, that's a massive difference. **(Josie)**

Josie worked on her own in the PA room for two years catering to two students who

were in wheelchairs and indeed Josie assisted with student mobility which is in line with a

PA role according to literature, Parker (1999) states one of the duties required by PAs is to

support students with mobility (p.489) so that the students can attend classes. The PA role was hands-on in 2005 in terms of physically assisting the students to and from classes despite having fewer students as their needs required a more hands-on approach. The PA literature was very much associated with just that, supporting students with their physical needs which is reflected in the definition of a PA put forward by HEA (2022) that explicitly states a PA is a person who works with those who have "physical disabilities" (p.11) and as Josie mentioned, this was the case in 2005 however, the findings have uncovered how the students shape the role of a PA, the argument being, the students required hands on support therefore the PA role was more active.

Ella reflected on the year 2011, when she first started as a PA. Ella outlines another major role change in the college that impacted her role as a PA, which is a resource teacher, they were hired to cater to the needs of the wider student body and that allowed PAs to focus on students with disabilities,

> I am a PA since 2011 and I have to say, the role really has changed a lot. Back then there was a resource teacher to support the main student body if they had any issues. It tended to be mature students that would have families at home, that just needed that extra bit of support. So they would have booked the resource teacher for an hour. So we had two resource teachers over the years and suddenly it never happened again. We came back one year and the resource teachers were gone, they did a great job with the students by helping them with assignments but by this time, we were essentially doing the same thing, helping the students with assignments for most of the day so we took their students and now we are nearly the resource teachers because we take those students who simply just need a bit of a hand. **(ELLA)**

Note the sudden change when the resource teacher was not employed the following year as this is a side post that is assigned to schools on a need basis (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016, p.5). The possibility that the PA role was indeed as ELLA puts it "essentially doing the same thing" as a resource teacher therefore, in the absence of such, PAs took on the additional role of supporting the wider student body.

The changes that occurred in the years 2005 and 2011 are reflected in the current PA role, there are nine PAs employed in this college to meet the demand of students availing of the service, but one major finding is the role change. The idea that the students shape the PA role can be noted but really, role changes is prominent in this theme and I will explain why, upon further analysis it was found, a student with high needs requires more hands on support, like Josie outlined, compared to this year, where the students' needs are more academically based, thus shaping the PA role to that of a resource teacher, what I see here, is a cross over between a PA supporting students with disabilities and a resource teacher or tutoring session that the PAs now essentially find themselves in, reflecting the situation in 2011, here is Ella and her experience of the role change,

> See, this year there was no one in a wheelchair who required assistance but who knows about next year and that's when our role will change, it depends on the students. This year it was more of a tutoring session, really academic based work rather than hands on physical duties. The students just book an appointment and we will assist with their assignments. **(Ella)**

An interesting choice of words outlined by Ella used to describe the current leading role of a PA, the word 'tutoring' was used to identify a similar PA role in a Spanish study as mentioned earlier in the literature review, Morina et al. (2017) discovered university 2's disability service used the title "supporting academic tutor" (p. 1615) where their role

involved supporting students with assignments and academic based tasks. It is clear this particular Spanish role holds similarities to the current PA role in this particular FE college in Ireland, however, we have uncovered in this theme how the PA role keeps evolving with every new year bringing about change, Josie made the following statement, "As the years went along the role changed every year nearly, every couple of years it changed", this line was simple yet echoed a sense of hollowness, r hopelessness in terms of keeping up with the evolving role which links to the theme of role changes and role uncertainty leading into the next section of this theme.

4.4 The perceived role of a PA: Job description

Another element to the theme of role changes and uncertainty relates to the job description. As part of the interview process, I used the job description as a tool to determine its comparability and from this, the idea of role uncertainty and hidden realities came through. Firstly, I discovered that four of the six PAs do not recall seeing the job description before, to accommodate this, the PAs were given time to read and reflect on the job description, see appendix v, and secondly, the role of a PA was not well defined due to the job description not accurately reflecting their role and responsibilities of a PA in an FE college.

Two major findings are pointed out by Aria, the first being the idea of PAs not being in sole charge of a class. The job description states: "In no circumstances may they (PAs) be left in sole charge of a class or group of students" ("Governing Body", 2021). Aria disagrees with this statement outlined as she shares how she was left to supervise a class, especially during exam season when they supervise reasonable accommodation,

It says here on the description that in no circumstances may they be left in sole charge of a class or group of students. I don't really agree with that because I have, as I said earlier, I have been left to supervise a class and sure, we supervise the reasonable accommodation exams and we also do assignment support classes so, we are left alone to supervise students. That job description is not correct about that. I also notice it says that we don't teach the students which are not true, we tutor them every day, we teach them, you know, we have to teach them because they don't understand the assignment or the assignment brief and it is us that helps them through it**. (Aria)**

The second point put forward by Aria is the idea that PAs essentially see themselves as a tutor because they teach the students how to do the assignments and it was found that they spend if not all of their day, most of their day helping students with their assignments. However, again, the job description states otherwise, "Personal Assistants are recruited specifically to assist schools/colleges in providing the necessary non-teaching services to students with assessed educational needs" ("Governing Body", 2021). The surprising element here is that all PAs mentioned the word 'tutor or tutoring' when describing what they do here as a PA. The policy of the college that the study has taken place in, states assisting students with assignments is a vital part of the role ("College policy", 2022) however, it does not mention the word 'tutor' in line with the job description.

It can be noted from research, that learning support personnel can be considered a tutor, just like LSW in England (Bailey & Robson 2004). The idea of role confusion emerged from a study that involved LSW providing essentially the same academic support to the students, leading to an 'overlapping role' between LSW and FE teachers as Bailey & Robson (2004) uncovered in their study. Referring to this study showcases how easy it can be to step

into the mind frame of a teacher and to overly accommodate students which results in a very blurred line between student support staff and teachers. It can be said the PA role is not well defined, and the idea of a blurred line between tutoring the students and assisting the students is evident here. It is evident due to the role changes, there seems to be a lack of consistency leading to role confusion for PAs.

From this sub-theme, it is clear the role is reforming but the job description stays the same leading to role uncertainty for the PAs, it is difficult to maintain a job description of an evolving role, however, there has been no research on PAs and therefore, no change will be made if there is no knowledge of the situation that PAs find themselves in, there is a need for a re-evaluation of the job description. The job description sets out the perceived role but does not change in response to an ever- changing role leading to uncertainty of the PA role.

4.5 **The Roles and Responsibilities of a PA**

This sub theme links to the research question and aim of the study. The job description allowed for the realities of the role to surface leading to this theme of roles and responsibilities. The data obtained from the interview process generated a clear sense of the PA role in an FE college. This theme uncovered three key areas:

- PAs create student folders and seek disclosure documentation
- PA provides academic support, in-class supports and lunchtime assignment support classes
- PAs assist with exam accommodation.

The roles here are clear however, I placed this key finding under the theme 'role changes and role uncertainty' because PAs are still unclear on their roles despite, three key roles being

identified, and this is due to their perceived knowledge of the role in accordance to the job description and the role changes leading to a lack of clarity on the current PA role.

4.5.1 PAs set up student folders: Disclosure documentation

Firstly, a major responsibility of a PA is to set up the student folders for those attending the PA service. It was found that PAs have the core responsibility to seek disclosure documentation from students hoping to avail themselves of the service. Discourses was an area that was explored in the literature review as a means to access a student support service, Furthermore, Majoko (2018) & Fuller, (2003) outlines disclosures are made to ensure the students get the relevant supported required and this is in line with the Irish FE college policy that states a discourse must be made before PA supports can be provided ("College policy", 2021, p.9)."We collect the disclosure forms from the students or sometimes the parents, then we set up the folders that will be used to seek funding"(**Tia)** As outlined in the literature review, SOLAS (2020) provides this funding that enables PAs to provide the supports for students who need it. This is a hidden reality of a PA role as it is not stated in the job description as a duty of a PA.

4.5.2 PA provides academic support, in-class supports and Lunchtime assignment support classes

It was found that PAs provide more academic-based support, again as discussed earlier, this is really shaped by the cohort of students resulting in role changes. The role of a PA is associated with supporting students with disabilities with course work, in fact, PAs found themselves at a laptop doing assignments with students for most of the day. I asked

Jasmine what a typical day looked like for her?, she revealed how she was booked up for most of the day, all academic-based work,

> For instance, yesterday I was booked up back to back for nearly the whole day. The students needed help with word processing exams and assignments. All students had learning difficulties and required support, I had one with ADHD and dyslexia. So, they need my full attention. But to say the least, we do assignments all day. (**Jasmine**)

These findings contradict the literature because it is quite focused on PAs providing the physical support element that they are overlooking other areas of the role, the idea that PAs are provided solely to take care of the person's physical needs such as washing and dressing (Stumbo et al., 2009, p,13) was reflected in the literature. Personal care is indeed a duty of the role, depending on the needs of the student, but it does not consume the role as literature and research suggests.

PAs also provide in class support, this was a predictable finding as it was noted in the literature as a core need for students with disabilities in order for them to participate fully in the class (Hendrick, 2012, p.173 , Hendricks, 2017, p.77 & Parker, 1999). In class support is provided by PAs for note taking and support in practical classes. In addition to this, PAs are required to carry out lunchtime assignment support classes four days a week, these classes are open to the whole student body and no appointments are needed to avail of the service,

> We do lunchtime assignment support classes every week, four days a week, and it's for everyone, no need to book in, it's an open door! We support the students with assignments but we could have a group of students attending or no students at all, it's a hit and miss. (**Tia)**

These classes are open to the whole student body which is not in line with the job description of a PA, they are employed solely to assist students with disabilities ("Governing Body", 2021). Lunchtime support classes provided by the PAs are also not included in the job description, it does, however, offer a contradiction of roles as PAs are technically supervising the classes, being the only member of staff present. LSW (Bailey & Robson, 2004, p.375) also are required to carry out workshops for students throughout the year, very similar to the support classes that PAs provide. It is clear the role of a PA is very conflicting. In one situation, they are assisting the class teacher and another situation lands them in an overlapping role to that of a teacher or supervisor, both duties that are not the role of a PA, it can be said many duties PAs provide are out of a scope of a PA role in accordance with the job description, ("Governing Body", 2021).

4.5.3 PAs assist with exam accommodation

Another core responsibility emerging from the data was the requirement of PAs to organise reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities, remembering that there are over 100 students registered with a disability, so this is a huge responsibility for PAs,

> We create the reasonable accommodation spreadsheet where we have to find an empty classroom, assign students to a PA if the student requested a scribe or reader. Then we supervise the exam, so which involves collecting the exam papers from the main exam hall, we then provide the students with laptops and we print out their exam before handing it back to the class teacher then it's straight into another exam. The exams are back to back. **(ELLA)**

PAs are required to provide reasonable accommodation to their students in line with the college policy that states PAs must assist in exam preparation being that of a scribe or reader ("College policy", 2022, p.4). AHEAD (2020) has revealed that 87 % of people who present with a disability need reasonable accommodation to support them in their studies. The association between PAs and reasonable accommodations was not noted in the literature however, AHEAD highlighted it is the duty of learning support services to provide reasonable accommodation to students (AHEAD, 2020). This is a very important aspect of the PA role as they support their students through exam season.

The roles and responsibilities of a PA were placed under this theme 'role changes and uncertainty' because the role is not well defined and has no clear agenda leading to role confusion linking directly to the theme of role changes and uncertainty.

4.6 Theme 3: Concerns: Status and Recognition

Two unexpected findings emerged from the data, the first is PA express concerns regarding PA title. All six PAs outline the need for a generalised term associated with learning supports in FE colleges to avoid any misconceptions regarding the PA role. Secondly, PAs want SNA status. The idea of SNAs being recognised by society leads to uncovering job insecurities regarding pay and status of the PA role in Irish society, this links to working conditions of a PA that was explored in the literature review. This theme is very much concerned with the current experiences of PAs in an FE college which links directly to my research question and aim of the study.

4.6.1 Concerns: The need for a generalised term

Terminology regarding the PA title emerged from two studies in the literature review, and both expressed the need for a generalised term in line with the PAs. This key finding also links to the objectives of the study.

PAs find the title too formal for a FE setting stating that many people associated the term PA with office duties or working for someone of higher authority, When we initially think of the word PA, most likely are thoughts would be associated with office-based work, the dictionary even describes the term PA as a person who provides support to another person in a professional occupation (Meriam-Webster, 2022), the term PA is very flexible here as it can also refer to the personal care of a person including bathing, mobility, and homecare (Hoenig et al as cited in Stumbo et al., 2009, p.12). The argument here could be made that the PA title was chosen because it represented the physical caring element to a person with disabilities. Josie has sparked an interesting finding where she claims students don't recognise the term PA and often ask her what she does here in the college,

> The job title is useless, it doesn't describe or even hint about what we do, there is nothing about the name that suggests we help students with disabilities, it's more like we assist the office staff or management, it's a formal name and it doesn't suit at all. There have been times when a student asked me what I was, who can use this room and that's not good you know, when we opened up the main student body, they had no idea that we were in the college because, at the start of the year, our focus is the students with disabilities. **(Josie)**

This all comes back to the idea of inconsistency among student support titles in schools and colleges across Ireland and abroad. In the literature review, I referred to a study by Bailey & Robson (2004) where they explored the inconsistency of learning support titles

amongst English colleges. The idea that one job has many different titles paves a pathway for confusion which results in people missing out on additional support. The lack of uniformed titles associated with comparable roles in colleges leads to misperception of the roles, therefore leading to student confusion as highlighted in the literature by Morina et al. (2017) where seven universities portrayed different titles for learning support services resulting in confusion amongst students.

From this finding, it is clear there is a need for a universal term for student support services in FE colleges in Ireland. The term PA is not a generalised term for student support and has multiple interpretations. Furthermore, PA does not reflect the duties performed and appears to be quite formal. It is exceedingly clear the term PA is not widely recognised here in Ireland in association with student students and because of the lack of recognition, the PA role is overshadowed by the SNA role which will be discussed in the next sub-heading below.

4.6.2 PAs want the same status as SNAs in society: Pay and conditions

A key part of this research is to explore the experiences of PAs, and it was found PAs want SNA contracts and status. PAs have expressed concerns regarding their job status and are currently fighting for SNA status. PAs are currently contacting local TDs and management about their pay queries and job description/title. The push for PAs to peruse this subtle action was the pay, lack of conditions, and PA contract, here is Lilly,

> The job description that the current rate of pay for our role is 14 Euro 72 an hour. I feel this is entirely inadequate. I feel it completely devalues the work that we do. If you look at 1472. Annual, and basis given the hours that we our contracted to

work, it's coming in at a salary that is not sustainable for somebody running a

household, running his family. It says subject to review, to the best of my knowledge,

since the Haddington Road agreement has never been reviewed and unfortunately,

this will eliminate a lot of people from being able to continue working in this role.

Looking at SNAs and their pay, it's hard because we deserve it too. (Lilly)

Lilly expresses the idea of feeling 'unvalued', Fortune (2021, p.109) carried out a

study where the findings indicated the support students' staff also felt undervalued and a

main cause of this is indeed the low pay and status. Low pay was found to be a major

pressure point for PAs who say that their wages do not meet the cost of living. PAs do not get

paid during college breaks leading to intense financial strain. It can be found that PAs hold

little status here in Ireland, using Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) to illustrate, the

macrosystem involves societal views which portray an invisible or neglectful view of PAs in

Irish society furthermore, having a negative effect on PAs directly in terms of little

recognition, pay, and conditions (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017, p.2). This has led PAs to

compare their status in society to that of an SNA, currently, PAs are seeking to gain SNA

status,

We are basically fighting for SNA status now, we contacted local TDs and

ETBs, it's sad because I don't see myself as an SNA, it's not who we are but SNAs

are recognised in society and we are not and it, in order for us to get the pay we

deserve we need to become SNAs, we need an SNA contract. (Ella)

The findings have revealed the title of PA comes with little benefits and entitlements

and this can be due to the lack of knowledge surrounding the PA role. The fight for status and

recognition can only be achieved with an SNA title or contract. Ironically, this was the case

17 years ago when Josie was first employed as an SNA,

The push for higher pay is what we are doing and we were advised by local TDs that essentially getting the SNA status would be of benefit to us, they get higher pay, pay scales and entitlements, just like I did 17 years ago and it was all taken away to become a PA, yet a PA gets nothing, no benefits and now, after all these years, we are fighting to get SNA contract back. **(Josie)**

PAs do not have a pay scale therefore, the rate of pay will not increase however, SNAs do have a pay scale with the starting point being 1 with a salary of 25,102 (Department of Education, 2022) with that being the case, PAs are seeking the same entitlements by fighting for a SNA contract within ETB. The question arises why the SNA contract was removed, and PA contract introduced? unfortunately, I do not have the means to address this question however, future research in this area would be beneficial.

Status and recognition were identified as a concern for PAs, low pay and low status were mentioned by all PAs, undoubtedly this a main issue for PAs an something they are experiencing in the field linking to the research question.

4.7 Theme Four: Experiences: Joys, Frustrations, Challenges and The Future Trajectory

As PAs shared their stories, naturally they spoke about the joys, frustrations and challenges of the role, but actually the idea of the future trajectory appeared numerous times within the data set. See, I am interested in the experiences of PAs in an FE college in Ireland, the good days and the more challenging days. The joys of the role were found to be embedded in positive PA- student relationships and the college support system. Role frustrations were very much associated with the notion of knowing a little about a lot, the

expectation that PAs can academically support all students from many different course backgrounds. Future trajectory is outlined as PAs seek other job opportunities due to pay issues as discussed in the previous theme. This theme links directly to the research questions as it concerns the experiences of practicing PAs in an Irish FE college.

4.7.1 Positive Student relationships

According to the literature, positive student relationships were not outlined nor discussed as a contributing factor of a PA role however, it is the most crucial factor that underpins the PA role, according to PAs. Relationships link to the mesosystem of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) where connections are seen as essential to the individual at the centre of the model, Clandinin and Connellys (2000) theory of the three dimensions also underpin this theme as they too talk about the notion of social and personal interactions, both theories highlight the impact connections and relationships have on our lives (Ettekal & Mahoney 2017, Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 as cited in Clandinin, 20006, p.46) and for PAs student relationships are essential to their line of work. All PAs expressed positive student rapport was the joyful aspect of their role and because of this lovely relationship, students show their appreciation by giving PAs gifts, here is jasmine who have developed a great bond with one of her students this year,

> I have a great relationship with one particular student, she just loves me, I think I'm her second mammy, she is very sweet, she brings me gifts like chocolates, cards and art work. She is a little sweetheart and she is just infatuated with me. You know this relationship is so positive because she relies on me to support her and knows that I am here for her during the day, she knows where to find me. I am her go to person if she needs anything, Its only ever me that she looks for. It's positive for her

that she has somebody there that she can go to if she needs help, like she really has taken a shine to me. **(Jasmine**)

Jasmine reveals that she has formed a positive connection with a student in the PA room, what is lovely here is the sense of fun and joy when the PA refers to herself being the students 'second mammy'. What the findings are unwrapping here is the idea of a PA being that fun positive support network for students with disabilities. A lovely story shared by Josie outlined how she formed a bond with a student who has down syndrome, they listen to Celine Dion together because that's his interest, but the literature lacks the realism of the role as Josie has outlined therefore, overlooking the student – PA relationships that essentially form the bases of a beautiful and meaning bond.

Working with the students is a core part of the PA role therefore, student relationships are at the heart of the job, but this element of the role is missing in the literature. This is understandable due to the lack of research out there on PAs and potentially no PAs have been given a chance to open up about their role. In saying that, literature has provided information that paints a formal and professional relationship between the PAs and students outlining the PA as the assistant or 'help teacher' who caters to the student's needs (Hemmingsson et al 2003 as cited in Hendrick et al., 2017 p. 73 & Logan, 2006, p. 96), Hemmingsson (2003) and Logan (2006) are missing the elements of fun, enjoyment and relationships which is uncovered in the findings as core aspect of the PA role.

4.7.2 PAs feel supported in the FE college

Emerging from the data was the idea of the FE college as a supportive environment for the PAs, it was noted by all six PAs as a joyful environment. The college prides itself on fostering inclusion- The policy in this FE college has outlined a general sense of inclusion for all staff members and students that is underpinned by SOLAS and AHEAD, as discussed in the Literature review ("College policy", 2022, p.1),

> I think this college environment is one of the nicest places I've ever worked, I think we were very strong and supportive management structure in place and I think this filters down through the ranks in staff and I feel when students walk into this building extremely welcoming and staff are very approachable, very knowledgeable, very good at what they do. And I think that sets the tone for students and staff. (**Lilly)**

It is clear Lilly feels supported in the working environment adding to the joys of the role and this links to Bronfenbrenner's theory of the ecological system where being in a supportive encouraging work environment in the 'microsystem' will directly affect the attitude of the PA in their role, potentially in this case, a positive attitude (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017, p.2). This theme reveals the working environment as a positive factor adding to the joy of a PA role.

4.7.3 Frustrations, challenges

A frustration and challenge that PAs face is the idea of PAs knowing a little about a lot! PAs are required to support students from different courses therefore, guiding them through their assignments where they must have some idea of the course content to support

the students effectively, however, six PAs noted this finding as the main frustration of their role,

> We have students from all courses that attend the PA room, and you know that can be tough, we are expected to know everything. It's very difficult. The other day I had a student doing a cap stone assignment and (laughs) I honestly, I didn't know what to do and so, I had to research and familiarise myself with the content on Moodle. The student got so frustrated waiting on me and I get that, he was stressed. They want us to tell them all the answers and I don't all the answers but I will find them to help the student but that takes research in my own time. **(Tia)**

PAs mention how they are expected to know the information for assignments from different course backgrounds, the expectation from the students that lead to stressful encounters if the answers remain unknown resulting in PAs researching the relevant information in their own time to be able to support the students and because of this, PAs have described themselves as tutors as they seek the relevant information required for assignments, essentially linking to the English study by Bailey and Robson (2004) and the idea of an unsteady step between the FE teachers role and the PA role and PAs noted this as a key frustration of the role.

4.7.4 The Future Trajectory

A major finding is PAs are seeking exit routes, progression and alternative roles due to pay and status. PAs see this job as a stepping stone, to be exact, 5 out of 6 PAs outlined their role here as temporary. 5 PAs referred to the PA position as a pathway to bigger

opportunities or a stepping stone. It was found that Lilly and Aria have plans to become

teachers,

> I do plan and hope to be a member of teaching staff in the college at some
> point, and I think what I'm learning now, working with students and with the other PA
> is invaluable and will always stand, but that's why I come back, week after week but I
> am studying in DCU because I want to become a teacher and being in this role allows
> me to stay relevant in the college. Once my teaching practice is completed, I will be
> applying for teaching positions. You know, the PA role is something I enjoy but It's a
> stepping stone for me really. For one, the pay is not very feasible which is a major
> factor as to why I would consider another profession that pays well. **(Lilly)**

Lilly uses the words 'moving on and stepping stone' when describing the PA position,

both identify pay and being unappreciated in terms of contracts and entitlements. It can be

said, the PA position is associated with being a short lived profession due to the pay that is

not feasible to meet the demands of a family. The mindset of the newer PAs surrounding the

idea of the PA role as a long term position was met with laughter, 'you can't stay in this role

for a long time, there's no benefits, the pay is too bad unfortunately" **(Tia).** Tia has no

intentions on staying in the role unless a change is made! It can be said, PAs see this role as a

stepping stone and seek better opportunities and so, a question I am posing to future

researchers is, what can be done to keep PAs in this role?. There is no research out there on

PAs future plans and, consequently, this is an area worthy of research.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the findings from this study. The voice of PAs was reflected throughout this chapter, as they shared their stories and experiences under four themes that aimed to address the research question. The chosen themes worked together to form a representation regarding the roles and experiences of PAs. The chapter presented a platform for PAs to share their unheard stories and with that, bringing new research to light. The next chapter outlines the conclusion of the study.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

The final chapter outlines the conclusion of the research study. Findings that emerged from the study have been discussed in chapter four and now, an overall conclusion will be formed. This chapter will address the objectives, research questions, study contribution, limitations, implications, recommendations, and future research. All of which is presented below under individual headings.

5.2 Addressing the sub-questions and research question

The study aimed to address the research question of 'what is the role and experiences of practicing PAs in an Irish FE college?' Several sub-questions were used as a guide and provided a sense of direction. It is important to note that each sub-question was not chosen in vain, but that they contributed massively to the main research question. The sub-questions are listed below:

1. Who are PAs? (Exploring Background, Motivation, Values, and Identity)

2. What is their work environment, (including, working conditions, and status)?

3. What are the role and responsibilities of the PA in the Irish FE Sector?

4. What are the PA experiences? (Understanding their perception of their impact /role).

The four sub-questions allowed the researcher to map out lines of inquiry, each one with a purpose that helped to bind together the research study. In addressing the sub-questions, it can be noted that PAs come from remarkably similar backgrounds all of which include a caring profession. Their motivation to stay in the role is largely associated with students and the passion they have to support students with disabilities.

The second question was thought of in line with Bronfenbrenner (1979) and his theory of 'the ecological model' this was addressed in chapters three and four, where it was found that PAs have a positive working environment and great support systems within the college, which was considered as a joyful aspect of the role. The working conditions and status were flagged in the literature review as a comparison between the SNA role and PA was made. It was found that SNA's held great status here in Ireland with their work being recognised in society (NCSE, 2003, p.2) in comparison to PAs who have little to no status here in Ireland. This was found to be a concern for PAs in terms of job sustainability.

Sub-question three allowed me to gain insights into the role and responsibilities of practising PAs and this was very much linked to the research question where it was found PAs assist students with disabilities so that they can participate fully within the college environment. However, PAs were uncertain of their role as they found themselves supervising exams and engaging in workshops. The final sub-question addresses their perception of their impact on students and it was clear that PAs see themselves as a support system to students throughout the academic year.

'What is the role and experiences of practicing PAs in an Irish FE college?

In addressing the research question, the roles of a practicing PA in a Irish FE college is to support students with disabilities, in terms of providing academic based tasks and physical support if required by students. PAs have the core responsibility of setting up student folders, gathering disclosure documentation and providing in-class supports (Hendrick et al. 2012, p.173). PAs are note-takers and organise reasonable accommodation for students with disabilities in this FE college in Ireland ("College policy", 2022, p.3). They are required to know a little bit of everything in order to effectively support their students with assignments and so, the findings are dissimilar to many articles and papers put forward

in the literature review (Hendricks et al., 2017, Hendrick et al., 2012 & Stumbo et al., 2009). The PA role reflected that of a tutor or resource teacher as they essentially tutor the students on how to do assignments. PAs also attend to the wider student body leading to a blurred line between that of a PA and a FE teacher, this was found in the English study by Bailey & Robson (2004) and was very relevant to the findings of this study. It is important to note, that each PA had a different perception of the role yet, doing the same role as one another. The idea of role uncertainty was a prominent finding in this study due to the many different perceptions of a PA role. This was addressed further as I gave PAs their job description which uncovered the hidden realities of the role and a very contracting job description leading to the conclusion that the PA role is not well defined. It was found that every year bought about change and the role of the job was shaped by the student's needs.

The experiences of practicing PAs is associated with the joys of students- PA relationships, and how they feel a sense of pride when they see their students succeed. PAs experience frustrations within the role especially the requirement of needing to know a little about a lot, and supporting students from all different course backgrounds. PAs have experienced some concerns associated with the PA title and their role as PA in Ireland. PAs are fighting for SNA status in light of low pay and no benefits, leaving PAs to feel undervalued in their line of work.

Considering the research question, this study highlighted some unexpected findings that being the idea PAs are unclear on their roles and responsibilities. Although I have outlined the roles and responsibilities of a PA, it was found the PA role is not well defined which is largely associated with the ever- changing role and unchanged job description. The role changes to suit the cohort of students attending the PA service every year. The job description does not change to suit the role and therefore leads to a conclusion of role

confusion and paints an unrealistic version of the role and with that, PAs do not see a future in this line of work.

5.3 Significance of study and how it contributes to wider research

This study was worthy of research simply because PAs are neglected in research. There is an evident gap in research and literature surrounding PAs in a FE college in Ireland and aboard. The few studies that explored the works of a PA were missing an essential element, their stories. PAs voices were not heard, stories were not told as Hendrick et al (2012, p.163) states PAs are excluded from research.

However, this study offers the opposite by presenting PAs with a platform to share their stories. This study draws in new information and knowledge associated with PAs role and experiences, it reflects emotions and entails raw data, something that is lacking in current research, and so, this study contributes massively by attempting to fill the void.

This study is of great significance because it highlights the PAs voices, its echo's the stories and experiences of PAs in real time therefore, addressing all areas of a PA role, and providing insights into the role of practicing PAs in an FE college, all of which is not evident from the research. This study would be of interest to future PAs and learning support staff in FE sectors providing them with an understanding of the role and experiences of PAs.

This study contributes to wider research as it provides first-hand accounts into the practicing role of a PA in an Irish FE college. Stories were captured using narrative interviewing and the PA job description was used as tool to explore the perceived role. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) was used to inquire into the stories as they unfolded and capturing emotions allowing readers to jump into the world of a PA. Theme

three in chapter four, explains how PAs have little recognition in Ireland however, this study aims to starts the process of recognition by sharing their stories.

5.4 Limitations of study

The scope of this study was considered a limitation, this study was carried out as part of a master's programme therefore, the scope was contained leading to a small- scale study and because of this, time was considered another limitation. Naturally, a due date was given and I worked towards this by following a timeline of events, all of which was concerned with time and as the study was taken place in an FE college, this put a time limit on the interviewing process avoiding busy times of the year such as exam season and leaving room for college breaks. I conducted interviews as soon as possible to avoid this. The number of participants taking part in the study was six, a small sample was only possible due to the methodological approach chosen and the in-depth information sought. Due to the small number of participants, it can be said the findings cannot be generalised as they are based on experiences.

The search for literature and research was considered the main limitation to this study. Due to the extensive gap in research, it was difficult to obtain information on PAs in Ireland and to combat this, I searched for similar roles internationally and nationally. I also used a key word search and searched learning supports services instead of PAs. This was precedingly difficult moving onto the findings and discussion chapter as much of the finings did not match, agree or disagree with studies or literature however, the limitations noted did not in any way devalue this study as I overcame the limitations by discussing these issues

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with my supervisor, being open to the lack of research but being determined to uncover newfound knowledge thus, bridging the gap in research.

5.5 Implications, recommendations, and Future Research

The findings of the study describe the role and experiences of practicing PAs in an FE college in Ireland. It was found the role of a PA is not well defined, the job description was found to offer contradictions of the role and that is expected as the role changes often, but the job description does not. The recommendation is for management to re-evaluate the roles and responsibilities of a PA in an FE college and update the job description to reflect those duties.

The study highlights issues that may have a detrimental effect on the PA position, that being the issue of pay and conditions. All six PAs spoke about the pay as a hindrance to the role with many reconsidering their career choice. Josie spoke about how her entitlements that had been taken away because of the change from SNA to PA title, immediately reflecting a sense of unworthiness upon the PA title. As mentioned in the literature review, 12 million was presented to HE institutes in Ireland to enable students with disabilities to fully participate in the college system here in Ireland (The Irish Times, 2022), despite this being required, the neglected area is the learning support teams within these colleges, they too deserved to be recognised, and so, there is a need for pay and conditions to be reviewed and reflect that of an SNA pay scale and working conditions. This may aid staff retention and lead to motivation to stay as a PA.

This study has highlighted the concern surrounding the PA title, PAs have experienced some difficulties with their title with 5 out of 6 PAs feeling they have to provide an explanation of their role because the title does not do that for them therefore, a review of

the title is needed to determine suitability. Broadly speaking, it was found that a universal

term for student support in FE colleges would be beneficial so that all students are aware of

the term and what it entails, avoiding confusion amongst students.

The current study places emphasis on the need for more research on PAs in Ireland

because there is little knowledge about the PA role in the FE sector in Ireland. Two questions

that arose during the study that I simply could not address, they were noted in this study to set

a foundation for future researchers, they are:

1. Why was there a changeover in contracts from an SNA to a PA contract?

2. What changes can be made to increase motivation and job stability for PAs?

Both questions are worthy of research simply because PAs are neglected in research

and this study has proved just that. I have given the PAs a platform to voice their concerns,

to share their realities and most importantly, to be heard.

At the start of the study, I mentioned one of the reasons I decided to carry out research

in this area was due to my work practice, I was new to the world of a PA and wanted to learn

more about the role. From this study, I learned about the duties performed and the different

perceptions of the role that my colleagues had, something I did not know prior to the study.

5.6 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the role and experiences of practicing PAs in an

Irish FE college. A range of methodologies was considered however, narrative inquiry was

found to be the most appropriate in addressing the research question because it allowed PAs

to share their stories. This was done using semi-structured narrative interviews, narratives

began to form and from this, thematic analysis was conducted to help me inquire into these narratives to gain an understanding of the stories shared by PAs.

This study gave PAs a voice that was once missing from research, it provides new knowledge of a very complex role. The study has started to pave the gap in the research area of PAs in an Irish FE college.

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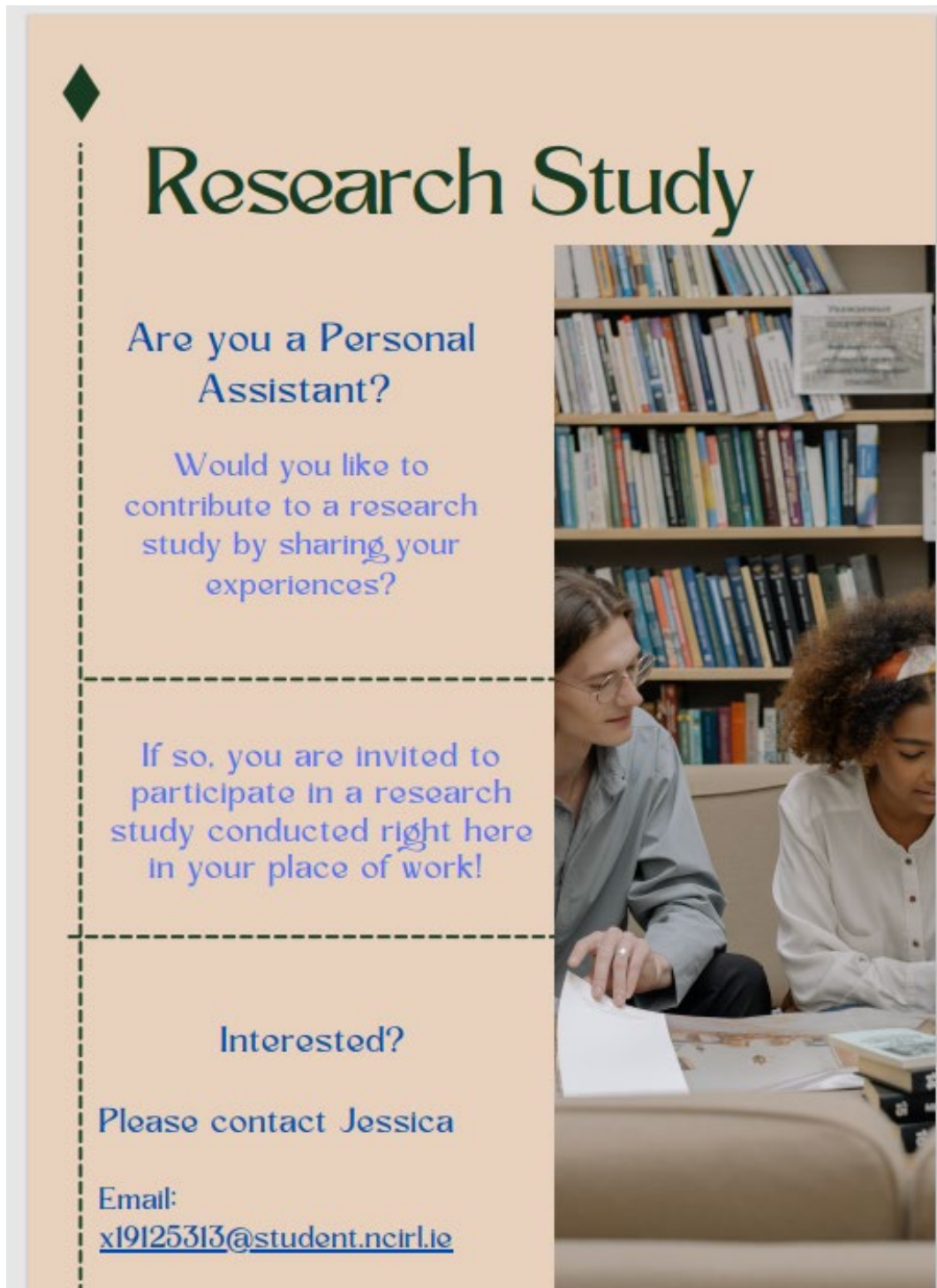
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INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF PERSONAL ASSISTANTS

Appendices

I: PA Recruitment

This Poster was displayed in the PA room. It was used as a tool for participant recruitment. Details of the research study were briefly outlined and my contact details were included below.

II: Information Sheet and Consent Letter

Plain Language Statement

1. **Introduction to the Research Study** 😊
 I am delighted that you are taking part in this study titled, *Investigating the role of Personal Assistants (PA's) for students with disabilities: Stories and experiences of PAs in a Further Education (FE) Institute in Ireland (Working title)* will be carried out at the National College of Ireland by Jessica Wall, a research student.

2. **Details of involvement within the Study**
Narrative Interviews will be conducted with participants, the term narrative is associated with telling stories. As the participant, you will be asked to engage in a narrative-style interview. This really means a conversation about your role as a PA in an FE college. There is no right or wrong answer, it's a chance for you to share your stories, thoughts, and experiences regarding your position as a PA 😊

An Audio recording will be taken of the interview using a secure device. There will be only one researcher conducting the interviews which may last between 45 minutes to 50 minutes.

3. **Potential risks to participants from involvement in the Research Study**
There is not an identifiable risk or knowable risk associated with this research study other than that applicable to daily life.

4. **Benefits (direct or indirect) to participants from involvement in the Research Study**
As part of this study, you are required to engage in a reflective process that may benefit your future practice. The study may provide you with career awakenings through the use of the narrative interviewing approach to research. The transcripts from the interview and the findings of the study will be emailed to you directly.

5. **Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect the confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations**

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The researcher will ensure to respect your anonymity, ensuring confidentiality. A consent form must be signed before any recordings or interviews takes place. The researcher will apply fictional names to protect the identity of the participants. Participants will be identified by using pseudonyms or as stated above, fictional names. These names will appear on participants' interview transcripts. The interview recordings will be stored in a safe location for five years and then destroyed as in line with the NCI ethical guidelines ensuring obedience to the GDPR regulations and guidelines. The researcher alone will have access to that data including transcripts and audio recordings.

6. **Advice as to whether or not data is to be destroyed after a minimum period**

In accordance with the NCI ethical guidelines and policy, all data will be stored in a safe location for five years or more (NCI cloud storage), after this date, all recordings will be destroyed.

7. **Statement that involvement in the Research Study is voluntary**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and can withdraw from the study at any stage with no penalty applied.

8. **Any other relevant information**

The participants in the study are Personal Assistants employed in a Further Educational Setting. The completed dissertation will be publicly available via the NCI research repository norma.ncirl.ie

Please contact the National College of Ireland Ethics Committee at EthicsSubCommittee@ncirl.ie with any concerns regarding this study.

thank you!

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Consent Letter

Dear Participant,

I am thankful you have considered to part take in this study, titled:

Investigating the role of Personal Assistants (PA's) for students with disabilities: Stories and experiences of PAs in a Further Education (FE) Institute in Ireland (Working title)

The information sheet and consent forms attached are intended to provide you with the relevant information required for this study. There is a short survey attached which outlines your understanding of what is involved in this study, please answer YES or No to the relevant questions detailed in the survey under section seven (7). It would be much appreciated if you could read the information provided and complete the relevant sections. Once completed, please return the information and consent form by email to x19125313@student.ncirl.ie

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any queries regarding this study at x19125313@student.ncirl.ie

Kindest regards,
Jessica Wall
Student at National College of Ireland
Master of Arts in Educational Practice

Supervisor:
Name: Ita Kennelly
Contact details: Ita.Kennelly@ncirl.ie

Participant Information

Working Topic: Investigating the role of Personal Assistants (PA's) for students with disabilities: Stories and experiences of PAs in a Further Education (FE) Institute in Ireland.

Research Question: What is the role and experiences of practicing PAs in an Irish Further Education College?

1. **Research Study Title**

You are invited to participate in the following study: *Investigating the role of Personal Assistants (PA's) for students with disabilities: Stories and experiences of PAs in a Further Education (FE) Institute in Ireland (Working title).* This study is being undertaken at the National College of Ireland by Jessica Wall (x19125313@ncirl.ie).

2. **Purpose of the research**

This study aims to enhance knowledge and provide much-needed insights surrounding the role of Personal Assistants in Further Education.

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3. **Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement**

Personal Assistants employed in a FE college are asked to part take in a Narrative Inquiry research project. The participants will be asked to engage in a narrative interviewing process where the researcher will use semi-structured questions as prompts to encourage conservation, stories, and experiences 😊. The interviews will be recorded using an audible device and later transcribed.

4. **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the option to withdraw from the study at any stage with no penalty applied.

5. **Arrangements to protect the confidentiality of data**

- The researcher will ensure to respect your anonymity and adhere to confidentiality. The researcher will use fictional names to protect the identity of participants and students. The researcher alone will have access to the data obtained.

- The interview audio recording and transcripts will be stored for five years in a safe location, NCI cloud storage. After five years the recording and transcripts will be deleted in line with the NCI ethical guidelines.

6. **Signature**

I understood the information presented within this form and have obtained a copy of this consent form. All queries have been answered by the researcher surrounding the study and as a result, I give consent to take part in this study (Survey and Signature required below).

7. **Participant Survey – please complete the following (Please Circle Yes or No for each question)**

Have you read and understood the Plain Language Statement /Information Sheet? YES/ NO
Do you consent to anonymised quotations and the use of a pseudonym (fictitious name)? YES/NO
Do you consent to the recording and storage of the interview process? YES/NO

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Participant's Signature:

_____

Name in Block Capitals:

_____

Date: _____

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III: Co-constructing of Interview questions

The PAs and I co-constructed the interview questions together by engaging in a brain-storming session where PAs shared their thoughts and ideas. The interviewing question were developed in light of this session.
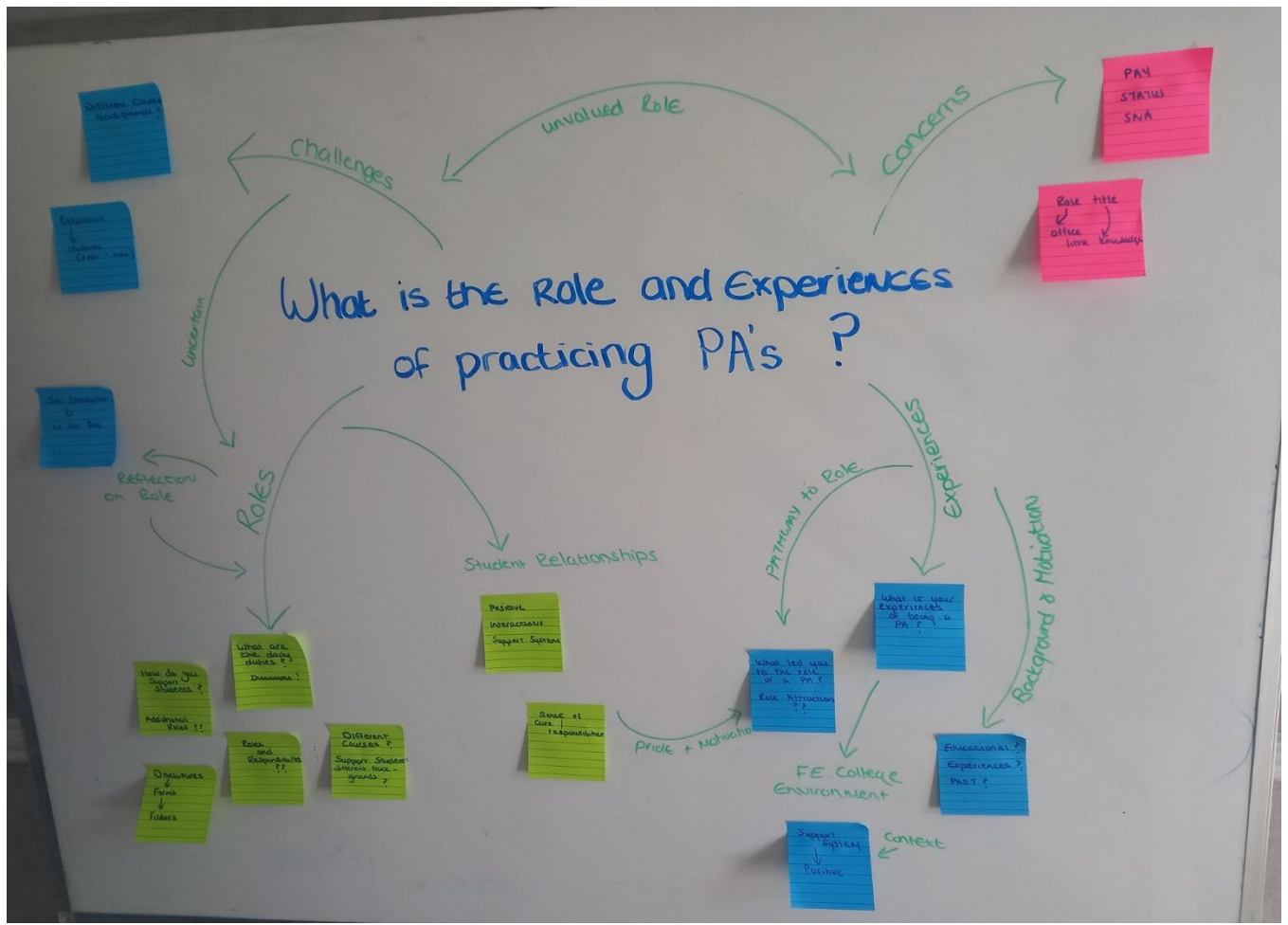
IV: Prompt Interviewing Questions

Focus Sections

1. **Roles and Responsibilities**

2. **Background and Motivation**

3. **Context (FE environment)**

4. **Experiences of Student Relationships**

5. **Students with disabilities**

6. **Reflection on the role and position**

7. **Motivation, Values, and Identity**

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1. **Introductions**
- To begin, can you tell me a bit about yourself?
- -Age
- -Qualification
- -Work history
- How long have you been in this role?

2. **Role and responsibilities**
- Can you tell me about your role and responsibilities as a PA?

- Give me an example of a typical day?

- Tell me about a time when you were asked to complete a task that was not part of your role here as a PA or was presented as an additional role?
- How did you feel about this?

- Can you tell me how you feel about working with students from different disciplines/courses?

3. **Background and Motivation**
- What has led you to this role as a PA in an FE college?
   - -Can you tell me more about this?

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- Can you tell me about a time when you felt motivated in your role?
  - Tell me more

- Was there a time when you felt demotivated in your role, can you tell me about this?
  - What was the impact?
  - Why did you feel this way?

4. Context
- Tell me a little bit about the college environment that you work in?
  - Why do you think this?

- Can you tell me a bit about the relationship you have with your fellow PAs?

5. Experiences of Student Relationships
- Can you tell me about a positive relationship you have with one of your students?
  - What is it about this relationship that you consider positive?

- Can you remember a time when you had to deal with challenging or reluctant behaviour from a student?
  - What did you do?
  - What happened next?

- I see you work directly with your students on a one-to-one basis. Can you tell me how this works?

6. Students with disabilities
- Can you tell me about the students who use the PA room or student support service?
  - Adult learners in an FE setting

- I am aware of the requirements for students with disabilities to attend the student support service. Can you tell me more about this?
  - -Disclosures
  - -SOLAS Forms

- Tell me about the resources available to students with additional needs in this FE college?
  - -Tell me more about this?

7. Reflection on the role and position

Reflection on the role:

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- Can you tell me about a time when you felt challenged or let down in your role as a PA?

- Tell me about a time when you felt supported in your role?

- Can you tell me about your thoughts on your position title, 'personal assistant'?
  - -Why do you think this?

- As you are aware, I am carrying out research in this area and I have found that Special Needs Assistants was a term widely used to refer to someone who works directly with those who have disabilities.
  - What are your thoughts on this?

- I have a printout here for you that outlines the job description of a PA. Can you have a read of it and share your thoughts?

8. Motivation, Values, and Identity
- What do you value most about your role here as a PA?
  - -Can you tell me more about this?

- Tell me what keeps you in this role?

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V: PA Job description

This job description was used as a tool or prompt during the interview stage of the study. It offered insights into the role and responsibilities of a PA in an Irish FE college. PAs were given an opportunity to share their thoughts and hidden realties of the PA role.

Personal Assistant to PLC Student/s

A Personal Assistant supports students who may require an enhanced level of support to enrich their learning experience and support their participation and equal access in their chosen course of study.

Personal Assistants are recruited specifically to assist schools/colleges in providing the necessary non–teaching services to students with assessed educational needs. Their duties are assigned by the Principal acting on behalf of the Board of Management and LMETB. Their work is supervised either by the Principal or another teacher as determined by the Principal. The PA may be required to provide support to more than one student in the same class of study. The PA will manage all information in relation to the student and/or their course of study in line with our confidentiality policy.

Duties involve tasks of a non-teaching nature such as:

- Providing personal care to student/s.
- Assisting in examinations, with assignments and similar activities.
- Special assistance as necessary for students with particular needs, such as assisting with typing, writing or computer use or the use of other equipment.
- Assist in facilitating the student's attendance at lectures, undertaking self-directed learning and other academic contact hours.
- Assisting the student with mobility and orientation around the college, assisting with carrying personal belongings and course materials as required.
- Assisting the student with activities of daily living on campus, where necessary.
- Providing general assistance to the class teachers/tutors, under the direction of the Principal, with duties of a non-teaching nature. (Assistants may not act as either substitute or temporary tutors. In no circumstances may they be left in sole charge of a class or group of students.)
- Participation with college development planning, where appropriate, and co-operation with any such changes with policies and practices arising from the school development process
- Engagement with parents of students in both formal and informal structures as required and directed by school management.
- Assisting in the educational and social development of student under the direction and guidance of the module teacher/tutor.
- Assisting in the implementation of Individual Education Programmes for students and help monitor their progress (when required), under the direction of Principal or teacher/tutor.
- Providing support for individual students inside and outside the classroom to enable them to fully participate in activities, under the guidance of the Principal or teacher/tutor.
- Working with other professionals, Principal, tutors, guidance as necessary, in the development of the student's educational needs.
- Assisting class tutors with maintaining student records
- Supporting students with emotional or behavioural problems and help develop their social skills, under the direction of Principal and teachers/tutors.
- Supporting class teachers/tutors and students in photocopying and other tasks in order to support teaching and learning.

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- Recent experience in working in a Healthcare/Social Care setting providing Personal Care.
- Respect for privacy and ability to manage confidential information.
- Excellent communication and interpersonal skills.
- Excellent timekeeping and reliability.
- Up to date manual handling training and experience in using equipment such as hoists.

DESIRABLE CRITERIA

- Prior experience of working with people with additional needs.
- Experience working in an education setting.
- Be highly motivated with good organisational skills.

The rate of pay is currently €14.72 per hour (this rate is subject to review), plus holiday pay and is subject to the conditions set out by the Department of Educations and Skills.

All applicants are required to be Garda Vetted prior to formal offer of position. Offer of employment is subject to satisfactory reference checks.

APPLICATION AND SELECTION PROCESS

Completed application forms should be submitted online through www.etbjobs.ie

Notes:

Please note that it is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure that all applications are received on time. Any technical difficulties encountered by the sender when submitting applications are not the responsibility of LMETB. Therefore, candidates are strongly advised to submit applications well before the closing date and time.

LATE APPLICATIONS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED

CV's WILL NOT BE CONSIDERED

SHORTLISTING OF CANDIDATES MAY TAKE PLACE

LMETB IS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES EMPLOYER

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF PERSONAL ASSISTANTS

VI: Audit Trail

A sample of an interview transcript in the form of an Audit trail is noted below, the raw data is in line with Lincoln and Guba (1985) to clearly document the interview process and to provide evidence of such ensuring a trustworthy study.

1. Hi ▬▬ how are you? So what I'm going to do is just ask you a few questions about your role here as a PA. And so to begin, can you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

2. **PA 15.37**

3. ▬▬▬▬▬. I'm here about 17 years now. Oh you know, like I said it was word first started in 2005. One the first PAs. I'm here the longest so. I'm just, I suppose I live locally and I'm not too far away. I'm just part-time.

4. **Researcher 39.34**

5. So yeah, so. So you're the longest PA here. Yeah. So, can you tell me about that?

6. **PA 47.60**

7. Yeah. Well, I mean, it was taking on as an SNA, and then my five years into it, then they changed the role from SNA which was same duties as we get any secondary school and than changed it to a PA, a personal assistant. As the years went along the role changed every year nearly, every couple of years it changed. ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ ▬▬. Every year can be different, so you can. So it's just like it's gone along like that since the changed role from SNA to PA.

8. **Researcher 1.24.18**

9. OK. And what do you think they changed the name?

10. **PA 1.26.47**

11. I think it's because it was a further education college and I wanted didn't want students coming into college, didn't ▬▬▬▬▬ with another SNA because they do have a stigma, the students coming in, they find it from secondary schools they don't like having to work with SNA again, so they find it better to actually work as a personal assistant, it sounds

Accessibility: Investigate

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF PERSONAL ASSISTANTS

VII: Data Analysis: The Coding Process

Following Lincoln and Guba (1985) criteria on trustworthiness & Braun & Clarkes (2006) Model of Thematic Analysis, step two involved the process of coding, below I had applied a colour coding technique that allowed me to associate a certain colour with a code.

The code was identified in the left column and the associated quote from the participants was noted alongside the right column. This was done for each of the codes identified from the interview transcripts and made it easier to find the relevant quotes for the Discussion and Findings section.

Colour Codes	Quotes
PAs engage in regular training- CPD courses and third-level education as a pathway to a teaching career/stepping stone? **CPD- not for PA role for other personal use- ambitious** **Issues regarding role stability (bring pay into this theme?) surrounding role stability** **PA identity** Why don't PAs want to stay in the role long term? Who are the PAs? Background and motivation	Lilly: "I also currently attend university, where I'm in my final year of an honours degree in education and training. I am hopeful that I will become a teacher, I teach night classes and I am seeking teaching opportunities at the minute because the PA role was never something I could see myself doing long term, I enjoy the job for as long as it's financially viable. I will do this job, this job, this role gives me a very unique perspective on students. On the internal workings and dynamics of a College of further education. I do plan and hope to be a member of teaching staff in the college at some point, and I think what I'm learning now, working with students and with the other PA is invaluable and will always stand, but that's why I come back, week after week" Aria: "I have degree in Education and training, which I completed in DCU that lasted for three years. I decided to be a PA because it was keeping me in the educational sector and I am gaining more experience, for me though, I don't see myself here long term. I want to become a primary school teacher eventually. See, the pay is so bad that I can not continue in this role even if I wanted to and its not just me that feels this way. a lot of the other PA's that are maybe doing degrees at the moment while they're in college or then this job and maybe to progress to become a teacher or maybe even to go into a different

IX: Reworking Themes with Codes

Following Braun and Clarkes (2006) step three, I searched for themes that best represented the codes that emerged from the raw data. Step four was also completed here as I reworked the themes to determine suitability in line with the potential research question.
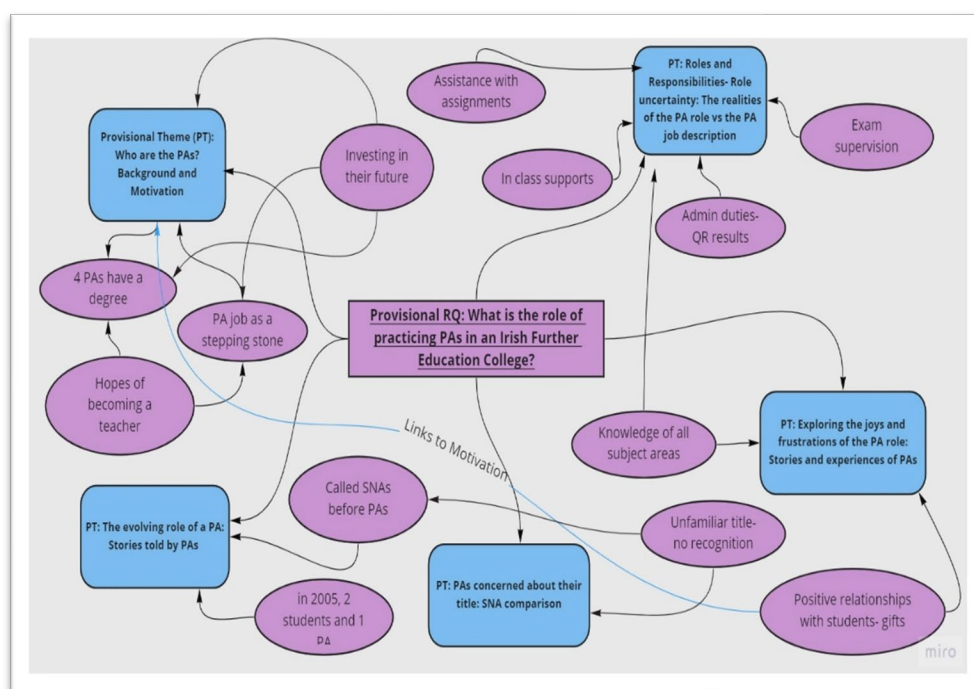

X- Final Themes

Step five of Braun and Clarkes (2006) thematic analysis was concerned with labelling the themes, I labelled the four final themes as seen below.

Theme One Motivation and Sustainability in the profession	Theme Two Role changes and uncertainty
Theme Three Concerns: status and recognition	Theme Four Experiences: joys, frustrations, challenges and the future trajectory

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF PERSONAL ASSISTANTS

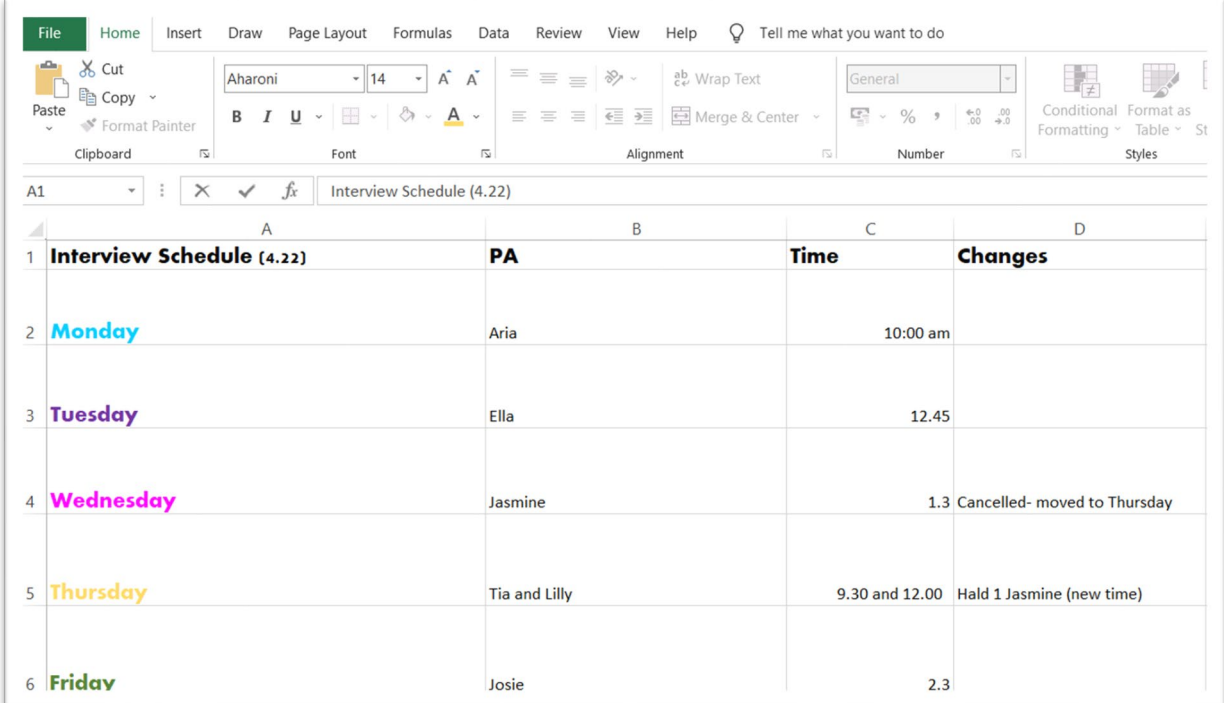### XI: Polit Reflection and Field Notes
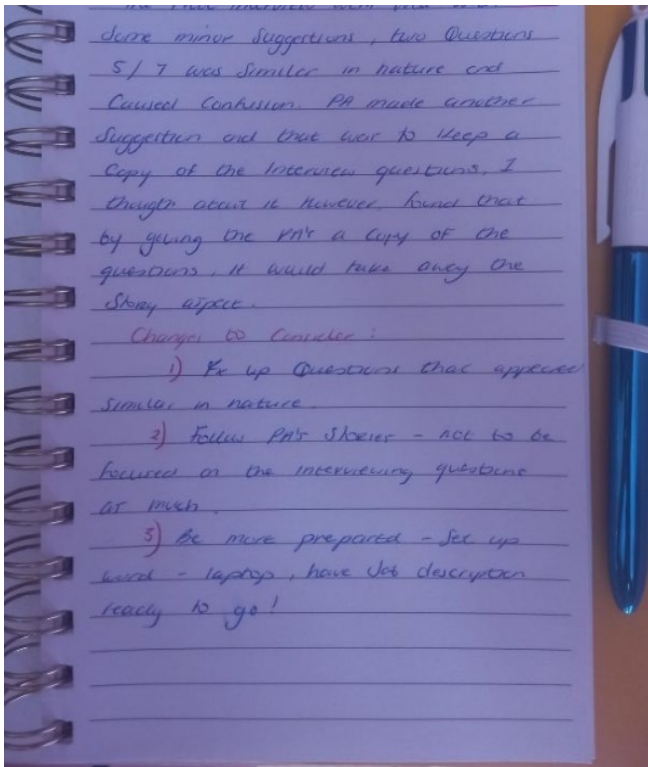
A reflection of the polit interview was documented and changes noted, see chapter two. A field book was used to reflect and document relevant information regarding the interviewing process and study is seen below.
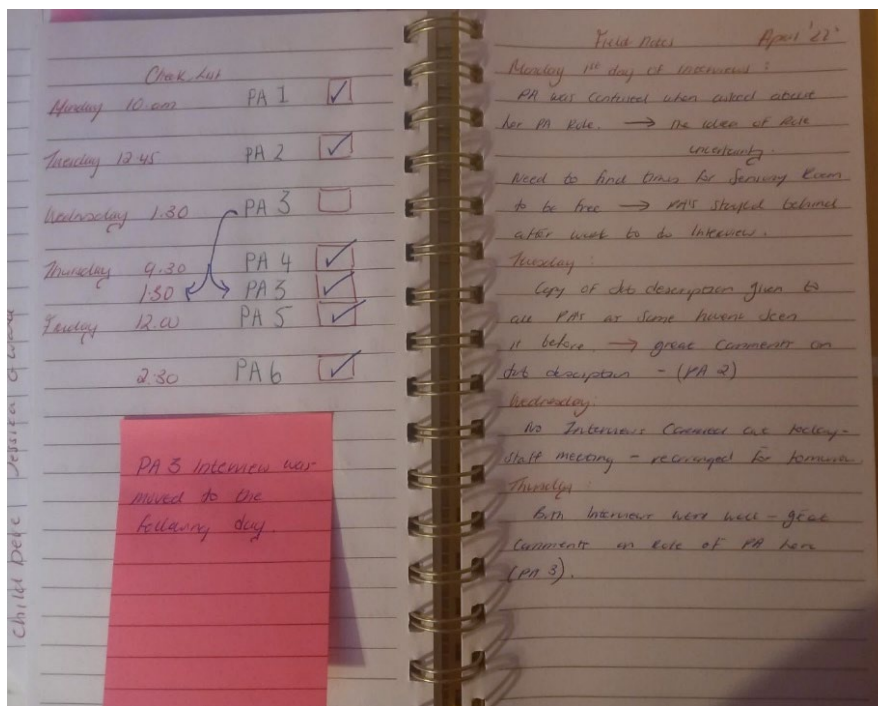
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XII: Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule (4.22)	PA	Time	Changes
Monday	Aria	10:00 am	
Tuesday	Ella	12.45	
Wednesday	Jasmine	1.3	Cancelled- moved to Thursday
Thursday	Tia and Lilly	9.30 and 12.00	Hald 1 Jasmine (new time)
Friday	Josie	2.3	