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THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT IN  
EDUCATION**

**The Role and Perceptions of Teaching Assistants (TAs) in Primary Schools of Azerbaijan**

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THE ROLE AND PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS (TAS) IN PRIMARY  
SCHOOLS OF AZERBAIJAN

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## STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICITY

I have read ADA University's policy on plagiarism and certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis, entitled THE ROLE AND PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS (TAS) IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS OF AZERBAIJAN, is all my own work and does not contain any unacknowledged work.

Hereby I declare that this master thesis, my original investigation and achievement, submitted for the master's degree at ADA University has not been submitted for any degree or examination.

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## **Abstract**

### **The Role and Perceptions of Teaching Assistants (TAs) in Primary Schools of Azerbaijan**

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**ADA UNIVERSITY**

**MASTER OF ARTS THESIS 2022**

Employees are integral and key part of any organization the success of which highly depends on their contributions and performance. The essential role of a leader is to increase productivity of employees considering their needs and stimulating their performance accordingly. However, there are no empirical studies concerning job satisfaction among teaching assistants (TAs) of Azerbaijan. The main aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of TAs in primary schools of Baku and the factors affecting their job satisfaction by means of their experiences, perceptions regarding their role responsibilities, and work relationships with teachers. The collected data was analyzed in relation to Herzberg's Two-Factor theory (1959) to find out the effect of Hygiene and Motivator factors on motivation and satisfaction of primary school TAs. Semi-structured interviews with nine TAs were conducted to collect data for the study. The given data was coded and grouped into themes under the research questions. The results of the study revealed that the TAs were not well pleased with some hygiene factors such as salary, working conditions and organizational policies and considered them as the source of job dissatisfaction. Motivators were the key contributors to the professional development and growth of TAs as employees and included such factor as work itself. Interestingly, some identified factors, in particular, relationships with peers and administration were contributing to satisfaction while recognition and promotion were mentioned as sources of dissatisfaction. The study revealed the dependency between Motivators and Hygiene factors within Herzberg's Two-

Factor Theory (1959): if the work relationships between TAs and mainstream teachers are positive and effective, it raises the level of inclusion and involvement at the workplace and increases TAs' job satisfaction.

**Keywords:** teaching assistants; primary; perceptions; relationships; factors; Herzberg

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## **Introduction**

### **Research Interest**

School is the social institution where students receive not only the formal knowledge such as reading, writing and mathematics, but also other things such as moral, values and ethics (Little, 2014). What role teaching assistants (TAs) play in this process and the number of different situations they face, triggered my interest in exploring how they perceive their role, work responsibilities and growth opportunities in private schools of Azerbaijan where they are widely represented. One of the examples from my observation includes the way how parents treat TAs as ‘nannies’ whose main responsibility is to feed, dress up and lead students to the gates. The attitude of some homeroom teachers also draws the attention of scholars – TAs are viewed as rivals and threat to the authority in the classroom (McDermott, 2017). According to my observation, the mainstream teachers may publicly question the instruction and practice of TAs and not involve them into class decision making process. As a result, students and parents do not see TAs as people who can contribute to their academic and social development and may treat them as not professionals. Finally, I know several teacher assistants who have been working at this position for more than four years and did not have any opportunity for promotion. Such situation led to either their turnover or loss of interest in their job.

Since 2008, I have been working in private international schools as a subject teacher, homeroom teacher and program coordinator for different periods of time. Throughout these years, I have worked with several teaching assistants (TAs) as well as witnessed the experience of my colleagues. Observing how TAs cooperate with different groups of stakeholders has always been interesting for me. The effectiveness of this cooperation significantly influences the teaching and learning processes in the classroom, the working relationships and role of a

teaching assistant within the school environment (Tatum, 2017). This is why teaching assistants need to receive experience and opportunities for collaboration and professional development to become effective educational partners and contribute to the learning process.

This experience made me realize how important it is to study the perceptions of teaching assistants and explore their role at primary school level. By identifying and exploring factors that influence TAs' development, it may positively contribute to individuals becoming effective, committed teaching assistants and grow as mainstream (lead) teachers. In addition, I would like to explore how TAs support the teaching and learning of pupils in the classroom, identify the factors which influence their effectiveness and determine strategies which could enhance their work.

### **Historical background: Azerbaijan**

According to Webster et al. (2013), the inclusion of students with special educational needs and low-performing students in mainstream schools is highly dependent on teaching assistants (TAs). This claim emphasizes the importance of TAs' role in maintaining the involvement of different groups of students in teaching and learning activities in the classroom and supporting their development.

Being a relatively new concept in Azerbaijan, the 'teaching assistant' came into the field with the acceptance of the Law on Education of Persons with Disabilities (special education) in 2001 and the launch of the "Inclusive Education Project" in 2005 (The Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2005). The Decree of the Panel of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population dated back to 2017 sets the following as main responsibilities of TAs in an inclusive classroom: organize the education of children in accordance with their individual development, planning and subject programs, consult school psychologists and other

specialists to identify the needs of the learners. In order to motivate TAs, the allocation of additions to TAs' regular salary is maintained (Education Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2009). In 2018, after the UNICEF reported on the actions needed to be taken for the successful implementation of inclusive education in Azerbaijan (Allahverdiyeva, 2021), the term 'teaching assistant' was officially added to the legislative documents in 2020 within the "Law on education of children with special needs (with disabilities) in the Republic of Azerbaijan" (Milli Majlis of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2020).

According to Gurbanov (The Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022), there are 157 children who are currently involved in inclusive education in 12 schools of Azerbaijan.

### **Definition of key terms**

The international academic literature provides different titles for the employees involved in the classroom-based support: classroom assistants (CAs), teaching assistants (TAs), support assistants, teacher aid, paraeducator and paraprofessional (United States of America), learning support assistants (UK), 'extra pair of hands', etc. (Collins & Simco, 2006; Clayton, 1993; Balshaw, 1999; Lee, 2002; Hancock & Colloby, 2013; Capizzi & Fonte, 2012). Throughout this paper, I use the most often applied term 'teaching assistant' (TA) to refer to these equivalent roles.

For the clarity of the given study the key terms are being defined as following:

- *Private primary school* is defined as is an educational institution "controlled and managed by a non-governmental organization" (Kitaev, 2007, p. 92) which provides educational services to students aged 5 to 11 (Cambridge University Press, n.d).

- *Mainstream teacher* is the member of the teaching staff assigned as a homeroom teacher in one of the grades and "contributes knowledge of grade-level curriculum and standards" (Bell & Walker, 2012, p. 15).
- *Teaching assistant (TA)* is the member of teaching staff who works under the supervision of the mainstream teacher and regularly assists both the teacher and student with the academic program in the classroom (Chambers, 2015).
- *Perception* is viewed as "a unique way of understanding phenomena by interpreting sensory information based on experience, processing information and forming mental models" (McDonald, 2011).
- *Personal-professional growth* includes growth-related elements such as motivation and capacity (skills) of a person in reaching a goal (Deci et al., 1991).

### **Purpose and Significance**

According to Hancock et al. (2002), the work of classroom assistants has historically been invisible and very little attention has been paid by researchers, practitioners and policy makers. In Azerbaijan, there is no published research that aims to explore the teaching assistants (TAs) as a group of employees, and little awareness of the senior leaders about the experiences of TAs at the workplace at the level of private schools. Furthermore, the majority of academic studies on human resource management for schools still focuses on the teachers (Watkinson, 2002).

According to the results of the conducted interviews, all of teaching assistants have a varied scope of roles and responsibilities making it difficult to define the 'typical' work of teaching assistants (Drake et al., 2003; Lee, 2002) as it varies across countries, schools and individuals. Drake et al. (2003) classifies their work experiences as ranging from 'ancillary-like'

work to 'teacher-like' (p.127) and concludes that it can lead to viewing teaching assistants differently by different members of the school community. Taking into account that TAs are rather new members to the educational community in Azerbaijan, their role may not be well understood across society.

As a former mainstream teacher, I have been able to observe and work collaboratively with different TAs. According to my observations at the workplace, one TA spends more time of her work day supporting individual students or group of learners during the lessons and taking over cover classes of the assigned mainstream teacher. Another TA may be mostly involved in managing activities such as leading the children to the canteen and outside, printing the materials and preparing visual aids. The case study conducted by Rogan (2021) revealed that assisting the class teacher in any type of necessary support was considered to be the main responsibility of TAs. In Azerbaijan, the Decree on approval of the "Unified Tariff-Specialty Questionnaire" for civil servants in the field of education defines the main responsibilities of TAs involved in inclusive education program and includes the involvement in organizing the education process of children with disabilities in accordance with the requirements established by the legislation, consultation with the school psychologist and defectologist to determine the developmental characteristics. In addition, they are responsible for informing parents or guardians about children's mental and physical development and defining the directions for choosing a profession or specialty in accordance with their abilities and capabilities (The Decree of the Panel of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population, 2017).

Nevertheless, accepting that accurately described job titles are important as they are closely related to the sense of worth, value and status at work, the typical work of TAs working



in regular classrooms lack commonly accepted definition and were hardly involved in any academic research in Azerbaijan.

Considering the abovementioned points, the results of the given study will help to explore the perceptions of role, effectiveness and development of teaching assistants in private schools of Azerbaijan as their employment rate is higher in this particular domain. What is more, the research will identify values that teaching assistants bring into learning and what the required opportunities for realizing their full potential are. One of the important insights that this study will strive to reveal are the TAs' concerns and challenges as well as dispute justice and equity in relation to their position as employees. Furthermore, the analysed data will help raise the awareness of school community about the factors that may influence TAs' personal and professional growth, particularly in their early years of experience. The information obtained during this study may be used by stakeholders in order to timely and effectively address the possible challenges in the future and determine "empowering" work environment needed to become effective TAs and grow as mainstream teachers.

### **Research Questions**

In the proposed research, I strived to find the answers to the following research questions:

- What are the perceptions of TAs in private primary schools regarding their role?
- What are the factors that influence TAs' personal and professional growth?
- What is the relationship between TAs and mainstream teachers and the influence of this relationship on personal and professional growth of TAs?

As noted by Dr. Mikailova (n.d.), the professor of School of Education in ADA University, it is important to make the voices be heard, especially if these are the 'silent' voices. I cordially believe that the results of the study may help me in identifying the 'empowering'

environment for teaching assistants, development of highly-professional staff members and possibly prevent the TA turnover and burn out at the workplace.

### **Literature Review**

The given literature review encompasses the studies conducted mainly in the UK and the USA as the growing employment rate of teaching assistants was observed during the last decade in these regions. The scrutinized reviews look at the role of teaching assistants (TAs) within the workplace and discuss the effects that they may have on teaching and learning process. The focus of the literature review deepens into analysis of the relationships between teaching assistants and mainstream teachers, how these relationships impact the effectiveness of the employees and what factors contribute to or hinder their social, emotional and professional development.

#### **Teaching assistants as employees**

TAs' decisions are significant as they impact the school experience of the students and probably some other adult colleagues as well (Drake et al, 2003). Support staff, that work alongside teachers in classrooms and include TAs (Whitehorn, 2010; Teaching Personnel, 2013) is one of the clusters in the school management structure whose aim is to help, facilitate and encourage the learning and teaching process in the classroom. Webster et al. (2013) see this group of employees as 'vital but largely neglected' (p.79) participants of today's class.

In Azerbaijan, with the establishment of first private schools in 2000s, teaching assistants came into field as the members of teaching support staff in primary grade level.

#### **TA's effect on academic process**

As stated by several country-wide reports, the considerably increasing number of support staff at schools is being observed over the past two decades in such countries as the UK and the

USA (Cremin et al., 2005; Woolfson & Truswell, 2005; Blatchford et al., 2009; DfE, 2009b; Webster et al., 2013; Masdeu Navarro, 2015;). A number of projects across UK were conducted in order to investigate (The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff (DISS), 2003 – 2008) the characteristics of the support staff, their effective deployment and impact on the student outcomes and evaluate the results (Effective Deployment of Teaching Assistants (EDTA), 2010 – 2011) in relation to empirically grounded Wider Pedagogical Role (WPR) explanatory model (Webster et al., 2011). One of the reasons for an increase of number of TAs was mainly fostered by the process of establishing inclusive education in mainstream schools that is also the case in Azerbaijan context (The Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2005). Reducing the excessive workload of teachers was another reason for such growth of this group of employees (The Decree of the Panel of the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population, 2017).

However, there is no consensus among the researchers if the members of the support staff contribute to the quality of the learning and teaching process as well as positive behaviour of students and class discipline. In global context, there is the ambiguity about the role of TA and their effectiveness. Several groups of scholars express their concerns regarding the deployment of TAs in schools. The ambiguity and inconsistency in the role clarity of TAs has been identified across the range of literature (Webster, 2013; Jardí et al., 2022). In addition, Dabell (2020) reports that the pedagogical role of TAs has been evaluated as ineffective and requests the cardinal reassessment of the way TAs are employed in schools. The present confusion across several studies requires additional attention from the researchers. Identifying the ways how TAs contribute to the teaching and learning process and the extent of it will decrease ambiguity and questioning regarding the role and influence of TAs on student's academic and social development in private schools of Azerbaijan.

One group of scholars (Blatchford et al., 2012) using the mixed method research design (pupil survey, observation and case study) found out surprising results showing that the students who experienced more support from teaching assistants exhibited much low performances than the similar students exposed to less TA support. On the other hand, a wide evidence of positive effects of TAs on academic achievement of students is suggested by another group of researchers (Alborz et al., 2009; Skipp & Hopwood, 2019; Sharples et al., 2015). To identify how TAs working in private schools of Azerbaijan perceive their role in affecting students' academic progress constitutes one of the main aims of the given research paper.

### **Relationships between teaching assistants and mainstream teachers**

According to the report of Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2016), the relationship with co-workers was mentioned as the top indicator (77% of respondents) for accelerating the employee engagement at work. McKeown & Ayoko (2020) found that workplace relationships directly influence on employee's practices, behaviour, attitudes and performance at work. The relationships between TAs and mainstream teachers play a vital role in stimulating and enhancing the teaching and learning process at school (Devecchi & Rouse, 2010). By identifying the factors influencing the effectiveness of cooperation between TAs and mainstream teachers, the results of the study may be used to increase the effectiveness of employees and, as a result, the functioning of the organization as a whole.

The literature provides a range of research data on the ways how to encourage teamwork and mutual professional collaboration between TAs and teachers (Cremin et al., 2005; Capizzi & Fonte, 2012) such as room management procedures, regulated allocation of teacher and TA time and attention to all children and strengthened equalised relationships. However, academics have paid comparatively little attention to the process of maintaining strong partnerships and the 'soft'

traits that are essential to an effective and efficient cooperation in schools. For example, in inclusive schools in Catalonia, Jardí et al. (in press) produced the data showing that respect, trust and valuing one another are the core factors that can impact the cooperation between teachers and TAs; time, effort and external support was recognized being the important elements of the complex process of building effective TA – teacher collaboration. In accordance with my personal observations, collaborative planning and involvement of TAs in daily activities contribute to their higher motivation and productivity.

One of the identified factors that can influence the relationship between the teacher and TA is the *role overlap*. Drake et al. (2003) considers that there is a risk of crossing the domain border of a mainstream teacher if TAs become more involved into teaching and learning in general. There is strong evidence that many TAs are performing tasks that have historically been completed by instructors (Hancock et al., 2002). The given research strived to explore whether the relationships between the teacher and TA experience the *role overlap* and any other factors that could contribute to the effectiveness of these relationships.

Another aspect that draws attention is the *attitude and recognition within the school community*. Lehane (2016) brings to the attention the quote of Dunne et al. (2008) where they conclude that “teachers use you” (p.7) as a result of analysis of focus groups study with TAs. Several TAs reflected that it is mainly them who are expected to initiate the communication as “very rare a teacher will come to see us” and “never kind of start any kind of conversation with you ...” (p. 11) (Lehane, 2016). In addition, TAs were not included in the working groups during The Deployment and Impact of Support Staff project (2003 – 2008) as they were not considered as a decision-making staff within the classroom and school as a whole (Lehane, 2016; Blatchford et al., 2012).

The purpose of my study is to explore the perceptions of TAs in primary schools of Azerbaijan and the factors affecting their job satisfaction by means of their experiences, perceptions regarding their role responsibilities, and work relationships with teachers. Along with it, the exploration of factors identified in the literature and raising the awareness of school community about the possible challenges and needs of TAs aims to strengthen the purpose of the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Asim (2013) sees the direct impact of motivation on employee performance and commitment. Since such extrinsic factor as money itself is insufficient stimulus in boosting the workplace performance (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Thomas, 1984), the working environment plays an essential part in motivating people to accomplish the required tasks (Bushiri, 2014). Workplace relationships make up a different and special group and highly influence the organization's performance (Soha et al., 2016). Handy (1993) defines groups and teams of employees as the ones who solve problems, make decisions, cooperate, foster information share and strengthen commitment. However, all the relationships originate from our personal needs and may influence our behaviour (Tran et al., 2018). Taking into account that TAs and mainstream teachers may have different needs, their behaviour towards each other and in general may affect the effectiveness of their collaboration and performance at the workplace.

According to Bolman and Deal (2017), the human resource frame puts the needs and skills of the employees in the centre of attention and promotes open-mindedness, mentoring, involvement and empowerment. An organization is viewed as a family in which every member needs opportunities to demonstrate their skills and capabilities (Gallos & Schein, 2006), the appreciation of which and recognition of good work Herzberg (1966) correlates with the growth

of intrinsic motivation of the employee. Providing necessary experience for the employees is viewed as a significant factor to motivate and increase their productivity (Seyfarth, 2008).

Understanding, recognizing and responding to all the aforementioned needs and factors is crucial in motivating employees and maintaining a long-term success of an organization (Bolman & Deal, 2017).

### **Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory**

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory or a 'two need system' (1959) was chosen as a framework for the given research as it provides solid ground for distinguishing and exploring the factors that TAs perceive to be significant in determining their motivation at workplace.

Frederick Herzberg (1968) stresses the importance of understanding the needs of each employee in enhancing their motivation.

According to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959), there are certain factors in work environment that tend to lead to job satisfaction (motivator factor) while another group of factors can prevent job dissatisfaction (hygiene factor). This is a dual-continuum theory that looks at the factors separately and considers employees' satisfaction and dissatisfaction as not opposite sides of the same continuum (Herzberg, 1968). Instead, they are two distinct progressions dealing with various variables (Bušatlić & Mujabašić, 2018).

Motivators are defined as intrinsic and hygiene factors as extrinsic to the job (Ho, 2016). According to Atalić et al. (2016), motivator factors are associated with *job content* whereas hygiene factors are treated as *job context*.

Herzberg (1959) determined motivators as inherent to work and constituting such factors as work environment, responsibility, achievement, recognition and promotion. When employees feel valued and have opportunities for growth, they are intrinsically motivated. The exploration

of perceptions of TAs regarding their role responsibilities and environment will help determine the factors that affect their intrinsic motivation and satisfaction with the job itself. The identified factors are important to consider in order to enhance TAs performance and encourage to strive harder in attaining personal and organizational goals.

Hygienes, or maintenance factors, can cause dissatisfaction if they are absent but do not necessarily create satisfaction if present (Herzberg, 1968). As stated by Ho (2016), hygiene factors are considered as support components necessary to refrain dissatisfaction but they do not serve as satisfaction factors on their own. Herzberg (1959) includes the organizational policies and procedures, working conditions, salary, interpersonal relationships in job context related factors that aim to prevent dissatisfaction of employees. In the school context, if the working hours and load of a TA is not effectively planned and regulated, they get extrinsically demotivated. Ghazi et al. (2013) bring an example that one of the reasons for employee dissatisfaction may result from inadequate low amount of pay. As emphasized by Herzberg (1959), prevention of dissatisfaction is equally important as enhancement of satisfaction of employees.

Furthermore, Dinibutun (2012) and Ghazi et al. (2013) consider motivators as higher-level needs while hygiene factors are believed to be lower-level needs. Chigona et al. (2014) admit that lower-level needs (hygiene factors) minimize job dissatisfaction and do not motivate the employees to perform commitment and effort. Individuals would be motivated only if higher-level needs (motivators) were addressed (Ghazi et al., 2013).

The features and characteristics of both factors of Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959) that are present in the literature are summarized in Figure 1 below.



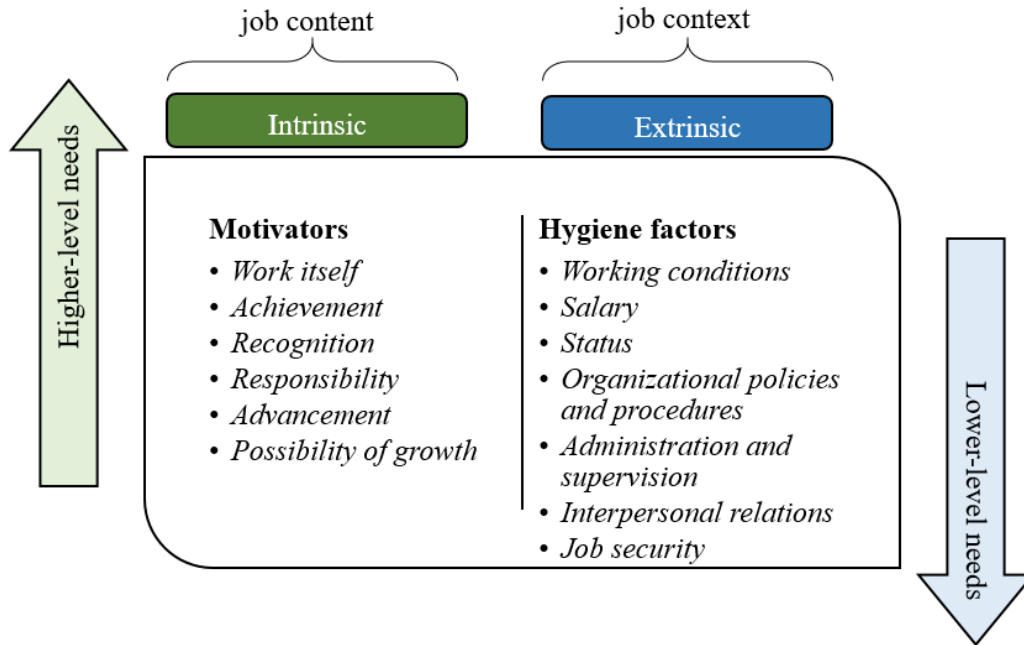


Figure 1. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959)

In his research, Herzberg found that feeling of responsibility for the final outcome is the key factor for the employees (Burton, 2012). Ramlall (2004) suggests that it is important for the employee to recognize that he is doing “meaningful and enriching” (p. 57) job.

When motivators are in place, these factors result in high motivation and satisfaction as well as create strong commitment among employees. Hygiene factors prevent dissatisfaction and contribute to general satisfaction (Holmberg et al., 2015). Considering all the above mentioned features of Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959), it will help determine what the factors mentioned by TAs and revealed during the data analysis are and whether and how they influence TAs' motivation at the workplace.

### Need for research

There is a growing amount of international research on TAs where it has concentrated mainly on TAs' efficacy at improving academic standings of students, behaviour management and other aspects of classroom life. However, many scholars claim that there is a high need for

more extensive research on TAs that approach this group of employees from different perspectives: effective ways of deploying TAs (Webster et al., 2013), the views of teachers and TAs themselves (Skipp & Hopwood, 2019), practice and effectiveness of TAs working in classrooms and the extent to which TAs interact similarly to teachers (Rubie-Davies et al., 2010), successful workplace relationship between TAs and teachers (Jardí et al. ,2022). In addition, Thomas (1992) points out that classroom teams have received insufficient attention as groups of people.

Simultaneously, my experience led me to raise a question about the reasons why some TAs are actively involved in teaching and learning process while others are not, how this factor affects their growth and the impact of the nature of the mainstream and TA relationships onto TA's personal and professional development.

Considering the identified gaps and need for further exploration of the related themes, the main aim of this research is to explore the perceptions of teaching assistants (TAs) in primary schools of Azerbaijan regarding their role in teaching and learning processes as well as the influence of interpersonal working relationships with mainstream teachers on their personal and professional growth.

### **Research Design and Paradigm**

Creswell (2012) describes research design as the defined procedures involved in the research process. It is considered to be a guide that provides the details and order of tasks or steps needed for conducting a study (Maxwell, 2012). Depending on the nature of the research problem and research questions, the researcher decides according to what type of research design to structure their studies. This step is important as the goal of a research design is to guarantee

that the collected data enables you to approach the research problem rationally and precisely (Creswell, 2012; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012).

For the given study, I decided to utilize interpretivist paradigm which assumes that the reality is subjective and is formed on the basis of individual's point of view (Ponelis, 2015). Acknowledging that the given research is focused on studying the perceptions of TAs, the collected data may help me interpret and understand how TAs' construct their own meanings and knowledge of real life.

### **Qualitative Research**

Considering that the purpose of my research is to gain insight and understanding of the beliefs and explore the impact of relationships on an individual's development and academic processes, qualitative research helped me to deeper explore the human experiences and implement a holistic approach to the selected issue. As described by Remler & Ryzin (2015), the researcher explores different relationships between variables and then produce explanatory theory based on the observed patterns. Many academicians see the qualitative research as the process of interpretation (Denzin & Loncoln, 2003; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Willig, 2017; Aspers & Corte, 2019) where the language, images and other forms of expressing meaning may be used as the sources for data analysis (Remler & Ryzin, 2015). The extensive literature review conducted by Aspers & Corte (2019) resulted in producing definition for the qualitative research; they define it as an "iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied" (p. 155).

Following the qualitative research design will help me explore the perceptions of TAs through what they say, do and feel, and provide rich description and data on the research topic.

The techniques and procedures used in qualitative study will create more opportunities for me as a researcher to gain deep understanding of such complex phenomena as person's perception which will be difficult to achieve through qualitative methods such as closed questions surveys. Additionally, I will be able to maintain the comfortable conditions for the participants by asking follow up questions, giving more time to reflect and answer, generating meaningful and trustworthy conversations.

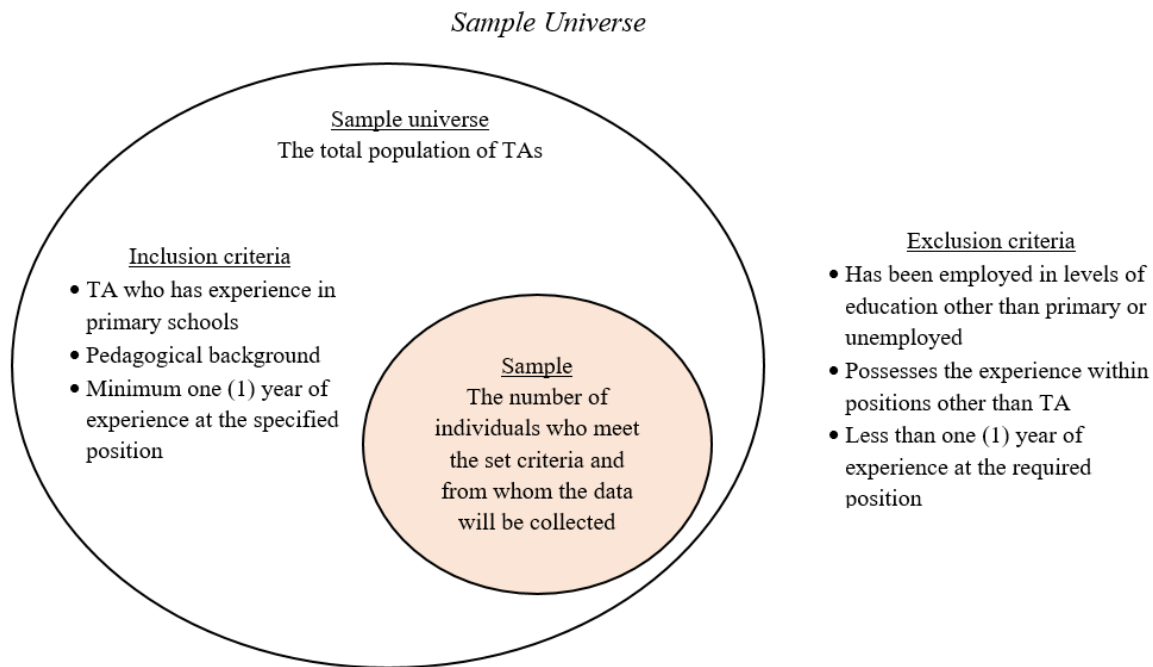
### **Research Site and Participants' Sampling**

The research was conducted in private schools located in different districts of Baku city where the primary level of education is delivered. The rationale to select these sites was that they could give me the access to the targeted population and interview TAs working in different curriculum programmes such as National, Cambridge, IB and Pearson.

According to Ritchie et al. (2013), the characteristics of the target population are viewed as the ground for the selection of sample population during the qualitative study. In order to effectively identify and sample the population, I utilized the four-point approach proposed by Robinson (2014) that consists of the following:

- a) *sample universe* which defines the inclusion and exclusion participation criteria
- b) *sample size* which takes into account the issue of practicality
- c) *sample strategy* which specifies the way how the potential participants will be included in the sampling
- d) *sample sourcing* which focuses on the recruitment of the participants

The *sample universe* is the total number of potential participants. In order to outline the sample universe, both the inclusion and exclusion criteria have been defined and sample population identified. The given information is illustrated in Figure 2 below.



*Figure 2. Sample identification strategy. Adapted from Robinson (2014)*

The set number of criteria helps to make the sample universe more heterogeneous and support maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2013) that will aid to collect evidence that is not bound to time or place (Robinson, 2014) and ascertain central themes across the diversity of cases or people (Ritchie et al., 2013).

Marshall (1996) suggests that the *sample size* is highly dependent on the research question and considers the sample size to be appropriate if it can answer the research question. The number of participants is subject to change during the study in case the researcher reaches saturation (Creswell, 2012; Marshall, 1996) or, on the opposite, realizes that he/she did not include the important group of participants in the original sample universe (Silverman, 2010; Robinson, 2014). Some indicators of saturation include: the data is being repeated and the absence of new data revealed within the category, the correlation between the categories is

identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The thorough literature review conducted by Thomson (2011), revealed that saturation may be observed between 10 and 30 interviews. Furthermore, the practicality and effectiveness should be taken into account as the researcher will need to document the details about every participant, collect and analyze the data. Thus, reviewing the scholars' recommendations for sample size in qualitative study (Thomson, 2011; Creswell, 2012; Robinson, 2014;) where it ranges from 1 to 30 cases. The expected sample size is 10 participants.

Taking into account that my focus was on members of specific subgroup of school community who are not widely represented and I strived to target individuals who possessed the particular knowledge about the research interest (Mason, 2002; Schutt, 2012; Robinson 2014), I applied convenience approach (Marshall, 1996) and used nonprobability purposive *sampling strategy* as it assisted the comprehension of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Maruyama et al. (2014) points out that being able to generalize the results to the population is not always the main goal to conduct the research and nonprobability is treated as more relevant technique. In addition, Robinson (2014) warns that the only threat for the convenience sampling is the broad sample universe which is not the case of the current research. By means of this strategy, I contacted 10 teaching assistants in various private and/or international schools in Baku who fall under the defined inclusion criteria (Figure 2) via phone call and invited them to participate in the study. Only 6 teaching assistants agreed to participate in the research. After starting the data collection process, I undertook a snowball or chain sampling strategy in order to recruit additional information-rich informants (Patton, 1990; Patton, 2002) and increased the sample frame by 9 participants. It resulted in broader exploration of the phenomenon and more themes emerging from the data analysis at the later steps of the research.

*Sample sourcing* is the final point in engaging the participants and requires hands-on advertising and recruitment approach with careful ethical and sensitive considerations (Robinson, 2014). For this purpose, I informed the potential respondents about the aims of the study, what was expected from them, how the anonymity would be ensured and voluntary nature of the participation by sending them the Informed Consent Form (Appendix 1) in order to make sure they were aware of participation details in the study. According to Devers & Frankel (2000), another way to enlarge the participant group is to use the personal networks and channels of communication of a recruitment gatekeeper or a research champion (Robinson, 2014). In the given research, I negotiated with the principals, administrators and senior management staff members within my professional circle and maintained access to the potential respondents. The total length of the conducted interviews constituted about 7 hours of audio recording.

### **Data Collection**

As stated by Patton (2015), the qualitative data is composed of direct quotations of the respondents, their beliefs and opinions, narration of their behavior and a variety of documents. According to Creswell (2012), the qualitative researcher usually uses interviews with mainly open-ended questions or observations. As an interpretivist, I considered the perceptions and understandings or 'insider view' (Blaikie, 2000) of the respondents as the primary data sources (Mason, 2002) and implemented the data collection using semi-structured interviews, documents review and research journal as tools. The entire process of data collection and analysis lasted for two (2) months beginning from February and ending in late March.

### **Interviews**

According to Vogt et al. (2012), interviews are effective tool when the researcher seeks for knowledge and comprehensive reflective answers. Aiming at investigation of TAs'

perceptions, interviews can serve as a good method to provide opportunities for TAs to express and explain their ideas and for the researcher to explore TAs' thoughts and opinions.

I utilized semi-structured interviews that use both closed and open-ended questions (Adams, 2015) as they supported trustworthiness and maintained the feeling of openness in order to explore and detail the perceptions of TAs on their role within the educational process and school community and how it influences on their personal and professional growth. Each respondent was interviewed once using the language that is more comfortable for the interviewee: Azerbaijani, Russian or English. With the permission of respondents, a voice recorder was utilized during the interviews as open-ended questions may lead to a longer discussion. The collected data was later transcribed, coded and analyzed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The average length of each of the interviews was about 35 minutes.

## **Documents**

Creswell (2012) considers documents as efficient sources of information imply public and private records both in text and audio-visual formats. By reviewing the existing documents, it gave me opportunity to review the historical background of the participants and create the additional perspectives, for example, the ways of employment of TAs, the results of evaluation of TAs as members of pedagogical staff, the degree of their participation in the teaching and learning processes, the involvement of TAs in professional development as well as their decision-making within the classroom and the school as a whole. The official and unofficial documents such as class and school meeting protocols, employee roles and responsibilities, written feedback, interviewees' portfolios, training materials, photographs, website and other related school documents were utilized during the data analysis process.



## **Research Journal**

The research journal is defined as an instrument used for “observing, questioning, critiquing, synthesizing, and acting” (Annink, 2015, p.4). The researcher may use it for personal reflections that may later be used to reveal findings that could otherwise be missed (Weiner-Levy & Popper-Giveon, 2013). Considering the fact that the research journal aids the researcher to rationalize decisions and recognize emotions, it may prevent the affection on the research process (Annink, 2015). As a researcher, I utilized this tool to record the details and reflections before, during and after the data collection process.

## **Data Analysis**

According to Jacelon and O’Dell (2005), data analysis is the process when the researcher explores and reflects on the meaning of the data and goes “hand in hand” (Mariano, 1995, p. 479) with data collection. I started to collect, transcribe and analyse data simultaneously by defining codes and grouping them in the categories based on their similarities. I continued this process until I reached saturation (Creswell, 2012) and no new findings emerged (Jacelon & O’Dell, 2005).

Considering that the interviews were conducted in three languages based on the participants’ preferences – English, Azerbaijani and Russian, the collected data was transcribed and coded in the original language in order not to lose or misinterpret the data (Van Nes et al., 2010). At the next stage, the codes were translated into English and the accuracy of translation was checked by two English language teachers, one being an Azerbaijani-speaking and the other a Russian-speaking one. Furthermore, the participants were contacted for the purpose of member checking and asked to confirm the trustworthiness of the interpretations.

The data analysis was being conducted simultaneously with data collection process and resulted in emergence of 187 codes.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the accuracy of the study, I referred to Guba's (1981) model of trustworthiness where I considered the aspects of truth value (credibility), applicability (transferability), consistency (dependability) and neutrality (confirmability) to maintain the trustworthiness of the research.

Within this study, *credibility* and *confirmability* was maintained by means of triangulation where information obtained during interviews, document analysis and my reflections in the research journal were used to create a comprehensive image of a given datum (Padgett, 2008) and member checks that asked the interviewees to review and verify the interpretations of the researcher (Kaminski & Pitney, 2004). Through peer debriefing, I consulted with the experienced colleagues and kept a research journal to provide thick description of research context, participants and methodology to maintain the possibility to repeat the study (Shenton, 2004) and support *dependability* and *transferability* of the research.

What is more, a workshop on data analysis was conducted by a professional faculty member of School of Education at ADA University, Dr. Aghayeva. The practical skills and experience obtained during the workshop supported the trustworthiness of the data analysis including coding and building themes.

### **Limitations**

Limitation of the current research is the gender factor as only female respondents were enrolled in the study. The site selection also restricts the scope as the research focused on private schools. Furthermore, the exploration of the research topic was restricted by the limited time

period and lack of previous studies in the given field in Azerbaijan are considered to be limitations of this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Informed consent is one of the most important ethical considerations that governs the qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and strives to protect the human rights of the participants (Byrne, 2001). The academic literature defines it as the process of obtaining the consent at different levels and includes the permission to enter the research site and gaining the agreement of the respondents to be interviewed and observed (Creswell, 2012; Wiles, 2013). Maruyama et al. (2014) appeal to the Belmont Report (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1978) that distinguishes three ethical principles needed to be respected in conducting any social studies with human participants:

- respect for persons – the choice of participants is overridden (Beauchamp, 2008). To support this principle, the participants were informed about the voluntary participation in the research and the consent forms were presented before the interviews. Particularly, the audio and/or video recording was specified.
- beneficence – the purpose of the investigation is to maximize advantages (Alexakos, 2015) by following the rule of “Do no harm” (Beauchamp, 2008). The results of the data analysis were aimed to be used by the members of school community to identify and meet the needs of TAs’ in order to support them in their personal and professional growth.
- justice – the participants are treated equally and with fairness that leads to maintenance of trust between the researcher and the interviewee (Miracle, 2016). The level of confidentiality and how the results of the study will be used in the future was clearly

presented in the consent form and communicated to interviewees beforehand. In addition, the participants were informed that they may stop the interview at any moment and ask the researcher to delete the collected data. Furthermore, the participants were

In addition, it is important to base the process on trust that can be achieved by clearly communicated goals, procedures and how the collected data will further be used (Mason, 2002; Creswell, 2012;).

### **Findings**

This research aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of teaching assistants regarding their role in teaching and learning processes. The study was guided by the following research questions: What are the perceptions of TAs in private primary schools regarding their role? What are the factors that influence TAs' personal and professional growth? What is the relationship between TAs and mainstream teachers and the influence of this relationship on personal and professional growth of TAs? By means of sub-questions, the work responsibilities, challenges, collaboration patterns as well as professional development factors and opportunities for TAs were explored. In addition, TAs' perceptions on students', parents' and administration's attitudes and understandings of TAs' role were analysed. Furthermore, the research strived to explore the relationships with mainstream teacher and whether these relationships influence TAs' personal and professional growth.

All the findings were categorized under the three research questions with sub-categories emerged under each of them. The overview of the findings revealed that TAs perceive themselves as the members of academic staff who are not much involved in teaching and learning processes. Moreover, the exploration of TAs' perceptions on students', parents' and administration's understandings of TAs' role at school disclosed the diversity among them.

Based on the analysed data, TAs perceive the lack of practice as one of the main obstacles for their professional development. It was also identified that TAs' involvement into academic processes is dependent on the relationship between TAs' and mainstream teachers.

### **Teaching Assistants at Work**

#### **Participant Profiles**

During this study, nine teaching assistants working in five different private schools were interviewed. The four of the interviewed TAs worked in Cambridge programme, three – in National, one – IB and one – Pearson. In order to maintain anonymity, I replaced their names with numbers. All the participants were females with background in teaching and working experience from 1 year up to 5 years at the position of teaching assistant. Two of the participants held Master's Degree in the related field. The Table 1 below provides the detailed information about each participant.

Table 1

#### *Participant Information*

Participant Information	
Interviewee 1	Contract type: service contract Programme: Cambridge Curriculum Grade assigned: 3 Work experience: 2 years Academic background: BA in English Language Teaching
Interviewee 2	Contract type: service contract

	<p>Programme: National Curriculum</p> <p>Grade assigned: 3</p> <p>Work experience: 5 years</p> <p>Academic background: BA in Primary School Teaching</p>
Interviewee 3	<p>Contract type: service contract</p> <p>Programme: National Curriculum</p> <p>Grade assigned: 4</p> <p>Work experience: 4 years</p> <p>Academic background: BA in Russian Language and Literature Teaching</p>
Interviewee 4	<p>Contract type: service contract</p> <p>Programme: National Curriculum</p> <p>Grade assigned: 1</p> <p>Work experience: 4 years</p> <p>Academic background: BA in Primary School Teaching</p>
Interviewee 5	<p>Contract type: service contract</p> <p>Programme: Cambridge Curriculum</p> <p>Grade assigned: 3</p> <p>Work experience: 1 year</p>

	Academic background: BA in English Language teaching, MA in English and American Literature Teaching
Interviewee 6	Contract type: full-time employee Programme: Cambridge Curriculum Grade assigned: 2 Work experience: 4 years Academic background: BA in English Language teaching
Interviewee 7	Contract type: full-time employee Programme: Pearson Curriculum Grade assigned: 4 Work experience: 3 years Academic background: BA in English Language teaching
Interviewee 8	Contract type: service contract Programme: IB Curriculum Grade assigned: 2 Work experience: 1 year Academic background: BA in English Language teaching, MA in Methodology of Foreign Language Teaching

Interviewee 9	<p>Full-time employee</p> <p>Programme: Cambridge Curriculum</p> <p>Grade assigned: 2</p> <p>Work experience: 3 years</p> <p>Academic background: BA in English</p> <p>Language teaching</p>
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As a result of the collected data analysis, two main categories were created. One of the categories is the TAs’ perceptions of their role based on the job descriptions, main responsibilities, involvement in teaching and learning processes and perceptions of other members’ of school community attitudes and understandings. Another category considers TAs’ experiences and perceptions of their environment which encompasses work environment and collaboration, challenges and supporting factors, relationships with mainstream teachers as well as factors affecting TAs’ professional development.

**TAs’ Perceptions of Their Role**

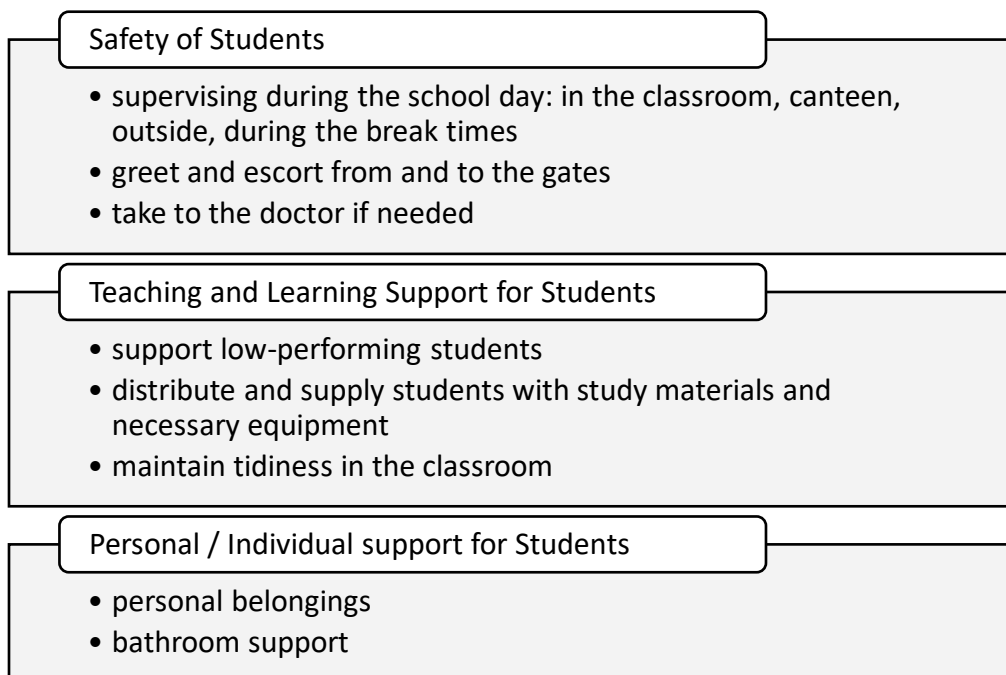
Through the process of data analysis, three subcategories that describe the TAs’ perceptions of their role emerged while attempting to answer the first research question. Each subcategory focuses on the exploration of TAs’ perceptions through the review of their work responsibilities, involvement in teaching and learning processes and TAs’ perceptions on students’, parents’ and administration’s attitudes and understandings of their role in the school context.



## Work Responsibilities of Teaching Assistants

To identify the perceptions of TAs regarding their role, the work responsibilities and key activities that TAs are mainly involved during the day were explored. The collected data indicates the consistency in the work responsibilities across all the participants. The key element is considered to be the maintenance of safe environment for kids. In particular, supervising and guiding them during the day.

By summarizing the collected data related to the responsibilities of TAs, several categories emerge as the result of data analysis. The Figure 3 below presents the categories and the identified characteristics.



*Figure 3. Responsibilities of TAs*

As mentioned by Interviewee 2, “Əsas fəaliyyətimiz uşaqlarla yeməyə bərabər düşmək, onlara nəzarət etmək...”. [Our main responsibility is to guide kids to the canteen, supervise them...] Interviewee 6 also shared a similar perspective,

Təhsildən də əvvəl, onların [uşaqların] təhlükəsizliyi gəlir. Yəni, istəyir fasilə olsun, istəyir həyətdə və ya yeməxanada olsun – onların təhlükəsizliyi bizim üçün birinci növbədə gəlir. [Prior to education, their [kids’] security comes first. That is, whether it is a break, outside area or the dining room - their safety is the priority for us.]

The participants’ responses suggest that the job description includes safeguarding the kids during meal and outside period, taking to the doctor in case of injury or emergency, supporting with hygiene and personal belongings as well as organizing and maintaining students’ attendance of afterschool clubs and handing them over to parents / careers at the end of the day. According to Interviewee 5,

One of the main responsibilities is being responsible for the children - safeguarding, child protection. If we are there, we are responsible for everything. During lunch and break times we supervise them while they play on the playground or the pitch. ... During the lesson if someone says that he has a headache or feels sick, I need to stop what I am doing at that moment and take him or her to the doctor... Later, when it is home time, we again supervise them to the waiting hall and waiting there until parents come to pick them up.

Considering the statements above, the summary suggests that safety is perceived as one of the main work responsibilities by TAs and forms a separate sub-category under TAs’ perception of their work responsibilities.

Another group of responsibilities incorporates “any assistance needed to mainstream teacher and ease her work”, as described by one of the participants, Interviewee 7. This may include printing and copying teaching materials, preparing the classroom before the lesson by distributing the books, copybooks or worksheets, supporting discipline by making sure students follow the rules. Interviewee 4 shares a similar response,

Прихожу и открываю класс, потому что есть дети, которые приходят пораньше и надо чтобы класс был готов. Если вижу, например, что у нас первый урок английский, то раздаю учебники, тетради, чтоб всё уже было готово [для начала урока]. И доску подготавливаю, свет и т.д. ... Надо построить класс – это тоже занимает время. Дети должны привыкнуть к тому, что есть порядок, правила, которым мы тоже детей обучаем. Нужно выработать у них дисциплину. [I come and open the classroom as there are kids who arrive earlier and it is necessary to make sure that the classroom is ready. For example, if I see that the first lesson is English, I distribute books and copybook so that everything is ready [for the lesson to begin]. Prepare the board, lights, etc... The students need to be lined up – this also takes time. Children need to get used to the school procedures and rules that we also teach them. We need to develop their discipline.]

Furthermore, TAs are expected to participate at the lessons and help low-performing students or students with special needs in acquiring the presented material. Interviewee 6 said, Dərsdə uşaqları üç qrupa bölürük. Xüsusi ehtiyacı olan, qayğıya, diqqətə, köməyə ehtiyacı olan uşaqlardan mən işləyirəm, orta qrupla müəllimə işləyir və güclü qrup isə artıq özləri işləyirlər, sərbəst şəkildə. Dərs müddətində onlara [ehtiyaca olan uşaqlara] köməklik edirəm, başa düşmədiklərini başa salıram və nə köməklik lazımdırsa, edirəm.

[In class, we divide children into three groups. I work with children with special needs who need care, attention and help, and a mainstream teacher works with the middle group while the strong group already works on their own, independently. During the lesson, I help them [children with special needs], explain something they do not understand and do whatever is necessary to help.]

In addition, helping students with using and managing the resources such as holding a pen, cutting or gluing is another area of TAs' responsibility. In accordance with Interviewee 9, There are classes and teachers who cannot deal with all the lesson. For example, during Art and Drawing lessons I need to help kids to cut and glue the pieces of paper. Or, bring clean water for brushes because the kids can get wet and dirty. In general, after such classes I need to clean up the students' desks and clear away scissors and glue sticks, wash brushes, etc.

The participants also described the processes of preparation to various class and school events as one of their duties. For example, at the classroom level the preparation includes designing and decorating the rooms in accordance with the season or a holiday. Also, crafting such things as a calendar, behaviour chart or an information poster are prepared by TAs. Interviewee 2 mentioned that “Tədbirlər olur – orada biz iştirak edirik. Misal üçün, əl işləri lazım olur düzəltmək – bu bir növ bizim üzərimizə düşür. [There are events where we participate. For example, handicrafts are needed to prepare – this is directly our responsibility.] Interviewee 3 shared her experience,

Ещё, перед началом учебного года мы оформляем класс. Например, делаем календарь или постер с правилами поведения. Потом, тематически украшаем пробковые доски. Обычно это бывает что-то связанное с математикой или

грамматическими правилами. В зависимости от сезона – зима, весна и т.д. - я обычно распечатаваю что-то, украшаю окна. [Also, before the start of the school year, we decorate the class. For example, we make a calendar or a poster with the behaviour rules. Then, decorate pin boards according to the related theme. It usually has something to do with math or grammar rules. Depending on the season - winter, spring, etc. - I usually print something and decorate the windows.]

Reviewing the participants' inputs, TAs' support in teaching and learning processes shapes another sub-category of their perceptions of work responsibilities. The analysis infers that TAs are responsible for supporting the working conditions such as maintaining discipline, assisting low-performing students and supplying students with necessary study materials during the lessons.

Eventually, the reflections of several interviewees defined the third sub-category under work responsibilities. Interviewee 5 described the case as,

... when someone loses his stuff, for example a jacket or a hat, we need to go there and look for it, check cameras to see what happened there and how, writing a report...

It is deduced that TAs perceive the care for personal needs and demands of students as the part of their work responsibilities.

Summarizing how TAs perceive their work responsibilities as employees, safety of students, teaching and learning support as well as support of personal/individual needs of students constitute a group of main sub-categories.

## **Involvement in Teaching and Learning**

Involvement in academic processes was the last that all the participants mentioned when describing their regular workday. The ways of TAs' involvement into teaching and learning processes is categorized as during the lesson and the direct teaching time.

The main indicator that they considered as involvement in teaching process during the lesson was supporting discipline through stopping misbehaviour, maintaining that the students' attention is not dispersed and making sure the students are concentrated on the presented material. As mentioned by Interviewee 9, "During the lesson, I observe the kids and if I see someone who is not listening or not focused, I approach and make such comments as 'Listen to the teacher. Sit properly. Put your pen aside.'" The comment shared by Interviewee 8 corresponds with the reflections of Interviewee 9, "During the lesson the teacher may give an exercise to write in the workbook, copybook or worksheet. Here I need to quickly hand out the needed materials while teacher is explaining the instructions." The indicated quotes mean that TAs see themselves as supporters in aiding the teacher to sustain the learning environment during the lesson.

Several TAs (Interviewee 3, Interviewee 4, Interviewee 5, Interviewee 7) indicated the support to low-performing students during the lesson either in the class or individually in a different room. Interviewee 7 stated that,

Dərs zamanı müəllimin qeydi və icazəsi ilə zəif və çətin uşaqlarla ayrıca keçməyə başlayıram. Uşaqları başqa otağa götürüb sinifdə olan proqramla yox, daha sadələşdirilmiş proqramla başlayıram onlara keçməyə ki, sinifə çatsınlar. [During the lesson, following the teacher's guideline and permission, I start to work with weak and difficult to educate children separately. I take these children to another room and start

with a simplified program, not the one in the classroom, so that they can achieve the grade-level standards.]

One participant shared that she was restricted from being involved in the teaching process by the school psychologist who stated, “You are a TA. You should not intervene into the process. The teacher is in the classroom.” This case infers that TAs are not treated equally as their authority to lead the teaching process is being questioned by some members of school community. Nevertheless, according to the reviewed job description of TAs, providing support to struggling students during the lessons is considered to be as one of the job responsibilities of TAs.

One thread that appeared in the interviews was related to direct teaching opportunities of TAs: homework time and demo lessons. Homework time is the main period of the day when TAs believe they are most involved and contribute to students’ learning by revising the material presented by subject or mainstream teacher during the lesson. At the given periods of the day TAs take a more active role and have the opportunity to practise their skills. According to and Interviewee 9, “Homework time is the only period of the day when I can step in and take the lead”, while Interviewee 3 noted that during homework time they need to revise the topics of the day focusing, in particular, on the content that students had difficulty to understand. However, taking into account that homework time is aimed solely at the revision, it does not give a chance for TAs to fully experience the real practice of teaching. Moreover, the review of the class timetables revealed that even these opportunities are limited by 2 or 3 times a week.

The majority of the participants specified the fact that they deliver demo lessons at least once or twice a year when the teacher, methodologist and head of the department attend and observe the lesson and provide professional feedback. As stated by Interviewee 4,

Я заранее предупреждаю учителя о том, что хочу провести один из основных уроков, например, математику. Я беру разрешение учителя... Насколько часто – это уже зависит от нашего с ней сотрудничества. Обычно это 1 или 2 раза в месяц. Сейчас мы даём уроки нашему методисту и в процессе она даёт свою оценку. Она рассматривает всё более детально и даёт рекомендации. Это бывает 1 или 2 раза в год. [I inform the mainstream teacher in advance that I want to teach one of the main lessons, for example, mathematics. I ask for her permission ... How often - it mainly depends on our cooperation with her. Usually, it is once or twice a month. Now we are delivering demo lessons to our methodologist and in the process she provides her evaluation results. She looks into more details and makes recommendations. It happens 1 or 2 times a year.]

These statements disclosed that the organizational structure of the learning process led to the limited time and opportunities for TAs to be involved in direct teaching practices.

In addition, there are cases when TAs ask the mainstream teacher to allow her to choose and teach one of the core subject's lesson. As stated by Interviewee 4, once or twice a month she runs a class instead of a mainstream teacher and feels 'like a teacher'.

The findings indicate that TAs are not provided with enough opportunities to be engaged into academic processes in the classroom. However, as stated by Interviewee 6, they could have contributed to the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes as long as they spend more time observing the students during different activities throughout the day and, thus, better understand each student's characteristics in knowledge acquisition. The TAs' perceptions of their role in teaching and learning process suggests that collaborating and involving TAs into instructional practices more effectively can positively impact the development of their teaching



skills as well as contribute to the teaching and learning progress of students during the regular lessons.

### **TAs' Perceptions of Students', Parents' and Administration's Understanding of TAs' Role**

The TAs' perceptions of their role at school were explored through their own understanding of how students, parents and administration perceive their role at school.

According to the perceptions of the interviewees, the students view them as helpers and problem solvers. TAs identify themselves as the ones who are always near and help students with regular daily tasks, cover their needs and are considered to be a friend. In the opinion of Interviewee 1, 'When students hear 'assistant', they think of a *nanny*. If a person is not teaching a lesson, it means she is not a teacher.'" The Interviewee 9 shared alike reflections, 'They call me to help them with dressing before and after PE lessons or supervise them to the bathroom.' It can be inferred that TAs think that the students do not associate them with academic and professional faculty members.

Participants believe that parents' perspective on a TA can be described as a reporter and a contact person in case of emergency. The majority of TAs stated that they are mainly approached with non-academic requests such as the time to pick up the child from school, the medicine needed to take during the day, packaging the study materials, changing clothes, helping out with meals and others. As noted by Interviewee 6, this attitude is consistent among the majority of the parents,

Valideynlər fikirləşir ki, biz ancaq uşaq tərliyyəndə paltarını dəyişirik,... Həyəətə aparırıq, yeməyə düşürdük. Amma fikirləşmirlər ki, biz onların [uşaqların] təhsil prosesində də iştirak edirik. Təəssüf ki, bu cür valideynlər çoxluq təşkil edir. [Parents think that we only change the clothes when the child is sweating, ... We take them out to the yard and take

him to have meal. But they do not think that we are involved in their [children's] education. Unfortunately, such type of parents constitute the majority.]

The presented ideas suggest that TAs' perceptions on parents' understanding of TAs' role is that they do not recognize them as members of teaching staff members but rather see them as the additional source of daily routine information.

TAs suppose that from the perspective of administration they can be described as the ones who are hardworking, responsible and contribute and support all the processes at school. Interviewee 6 reflected that they feel being valued by the department leaders and several respondents said they receive positive feedback from demo lessons as very evident teaching skills are observed and noted. Interviewee 3 reflected,

Ну вот, например, в начале года один из классных руководителей [начальная школа] не смогла выйти на работу. Я одна её заменяла, одна была со всем классом. Вы, наверное, знаете какие могут быть проблемные родители. А ведь это было начало года – класс украшала, задания составляла... Одна всё делала. И за этот период - целый месяц - не было ни одного ЧП [чрезвычайное происшествие]. За это и похвалили, и сказали, что хорошая работа. [Well, for example, at the beginning of the year one of the homeroom teachers [in primary school] could not start the work. I substituted her, I was alone with the whole class. You probably know that there might be difficult parents. And after all, it was the beginning of the year - decorated the classroom, prepared the study materials... I did everything on my own. And during the entire period - a whole month - there was not a single case. For this and I was praised, and said that it was good work.]

TAs' reflections on their understanding of administrators' attitudes towards them infer that their work and effort is recognized and valued; their skills being observed and evaluated.

To sum up, the explored perceptions of TAs on their role and responsibilities as well as how separate groups of school community understand their role at school disclosed the difference in defining TAs' role at school. While TAs perceive themselves relatively closer to academic-related duties, their perceptions on how others understand their role is viewed differently in terms of recognition of their professional knowledge and skills.

### **TAs' Perceptions of Their Environment**

Another subcategory that strives to answer the second research question - What are the factors that influence TAs' personal and professional growth? - looks at the TAs' perceptions of the work environment as well as their experiences as employees. Such factors as collaboration patterns, work relationships, supporting strategies and factors affecting TAs' professional development are discussed below.

#### **Work Environment and Collaboration Patterns**

All the participants expressed their passion to what they do and satisfaction from the work well done. Most of them used the word 'comfortable' when describing how they feel at work. In accordance with the words of Interviewee 1, she 'forgets about personal problems and feels better at school'. Moreover, Interviewee 3 said that she 'wants to come to school' while Interviewee 5 commented that she 'enjoys the work'.

Relatively diverse answers were received regarding the collaboration with different groups of school community TAs experience at work. Interviewees stressed time availability and relationships as one of the main factors that influence the effective collaboration. As mentioned

by Interviewee 1, “I hardly have time to collaborate with other colleagues. All day long I am mainly busy with kids. It is difficult to find time to talk or discuss some topics with other TAs.”

All the interviewed participants stated that the main group of people whom they collaborate with was the other teaching assistants at school. The relationships among them were described as ‘good’, ‘friendly’ and ‘supportive’. They usually try to help each other, provide support and encouragement as well as exchange with the valuable knowledge and skills.

According to Interviewee 4,

У нас есть ассистенты, у которых опыт работы больше и у них я могу поучиться. Например, касающееся декорированию класса – как создать и закрепить декор, чтобы выглядело аккуратно. Или, например, то, что понадобится классу. Мы обменивались информацией как сделать календарь так, чтобы он был рабочим и интерактивным. [We have assistants who have more experience and I can learn from them. For example, regarding decorating a class - how to create and secure decor so that it looks neat. Or, for example, what the class needs. We exchanged information on how to make the calendar workable and interactive.]

The given example suggests that collaboration with other TAs supports the positive environment and productivity of the interviewees.

It is worth mentioning that the *administrative approach* of the school also impacts the cooperation level of TAs with the other members of the school community. By administrative approach, the communication patterns, organizational procedures and policies are meant. For example, Interviewee 7 informed that TAs in her school lack inclusion as they are not included in any mailings or newsletters apart from salary announcements or birthday congratulations,

Sınıfimizə və ya işimizə aid olan məlumatlar valideynlərə və ya müəllimlərə göndəriləndə, bizi [köməkçi müəllimləri] heç vaxt kopyaya qoymurlar. Ancaq maaş köçürüləndə və ya ad günü ilə əlaqədar mail alırıq. Valideynə və ya müəllimlərə göndərilən məlumatdan bizim xəbərimiz olmur. Lakin, elə olur ki, həmin məktublarda bizim bilməyimizə lazım məlumat paylaşılır. [When information related to our class or work is sent to parents or teachers, we [TAs] never put into a copy. Most of the time, we receive mail when the salary is transferred or on the occasion of a birthday. We are not aware of the information sent to parents or teachers. However, it happens that these letters share information that we need to be aware.]

However, she believes that being shared with the information related to the work processes can help her not only integrate into and be aware of the work specifics, but also create the opportunity for professional development. On the other hand, Interviewee 5 shared a different experience where she is involved in weekly meetings with the head where they share and discuss any issues, ideas or concerns they have. According to her, “Every Thursday we [TAs] have meetings with our head of primary and asks if we have any questions or problems. So, if we have any kind of issues, first of all we talk to our head of primary. He always supports us and tries to help.” This suggests that some TAs experience a higher level of inclusion at the work environment.

The aforementioned points suggest that TAs are committed to their job but the principle and structure of administration at school impacts the level of their collaboration with other members of school community.

## Challenges and Support

There were two main common challenges identified across the participants of the study. The first is the workload that implies the performance of the assigned tasks and responsibilities. Interviewee 7 said,

Çətinlik odur ki, gün ərzində çox yüklənir işlər, yəni hamsını birdən görməliyəm... Adətən, yeməyə belə icazə ilə gedirəm. Düzdür, deyirlər sizin bir saat vaxtınız var, rahat dincəlmək, yemək... Amma ki, bu bir saat həqiqətən olmur. 15 – 20 dəqiqə, icazə ilə. Gedib soruşuram müəllimlərdən, “Ehtiyacınız var? yoxsa gedim?” [The problem is that I have a lot of work to do during the day. That is, I have to complete several tasks at the same time... I even usually go to dinner with a permission. It is true, they say that I have an hour for rest, meal ... But that is not really an hour. 15 - 20 minutes, with permission. I go and ask the teachers, “Do you need me? Can I go? ”]

From the given quote, it can be observed that teachers and management demonstrate little concern about TAs’ basic human needs such as a physiological need to have food. This is also supported by the statement of Interviewee 9 who said “I always have lunch with kids. During this time, I need to monitor whether all the kids finished their food or if anybody wants addition. This is why I cannot enjoy my meal. Sometimes I can hardly even complete it.” It suggests that the organizational structure and workload of TAs’ workday does not consider their need and right to have meal during a specific period of the day.

Another respondent admitted that she also struggles with effective time management during the day as there may be the last minute changes in the materials needed to be prepared or the unplanned urgent tasks such as making copies before the lessons. “Right before the lesson starts, the teacher may ask me to make extra copies or prepare the resources that are not usually

used at that particular lesson. For example, hand out plasticine during Science lesson. These type of requests are usually unexpected.” According to Interviewee 9, she may be given a task at any moment which hinders the fulfilment of the assigned tasks.

Discipline and behaviour issues among students are the second challenge faced by one-third of interviewed TAs. One group of the participants stated that there are students who are difficult to educate due to their social-emotional background and need a more sensitive and individual approach. Interviewee 4 explained,

Почти в каждом классе есть особенные дети. С ними работать нужно по-другому, не так как с остальными. Не зная эффективных методов работы с ними, я стараюсь интуитивно понять, как это сделать лучше... нащупываю почву чтоб узнать, на сколько это работает или нет. Но бывает трудно найти к ним подход. [There are children with special needs almost in every class. You need to work with them differently, not like with the others. Without knowing the effective methods of working with them, I try to intuitively understand how to do it better ... I test the waters to find out how well something works or not. But it can be difficult to find an approach to them.]

Interviewee 5 describes such the challenges as ‘annoying’, especially when faced in public places – canteen, library, school yard.

In addition, two participants mentioned they experience challenges when communicating to parents. According to Interviewee 4, «Потерялась, например, бутылка – они [родители] могут из этого делать проблему. А это к обучению вообще не относится.» [For example, a water bottle is lost - they [parents] can make a problem out of this. However, this has nothing to do with education.] This example shows that TAs face challenges that are not always related to teaching and learning processes but students’ personal and organizational issues.

When encountered with the abovementioned or any other challenges, the interviewees mainly seek for support from other TAs or try to resolve the situation on their own even if this will require them to “stay longer or come earlier to school”, as mentioned by Interviewee 3,

Например, если я не успеваю что-то распечатать, я могу остаться до 6 и всё сделать или с утра рано приду, доделаю... [For example, if I do not have enough time to print something, I can stay until 6 and do everything, or I come early in the morning and finish it ...]

Several respondents mentioned a person from administrative team (head of the grade level, head of the department, head of the subject team) whom they most probably will address for advice or solution. Interviewee 5 observed, “Head of year 4 and head of primary – they always support us, try to help. I usually talk to them if I have any problems or issues. When they pass by the corridor and see us, they can come and encourage us, “Good Job! Keep going!” This means that school administration plays a supportive role for TAs in helping them with daily responsibilities.

In one of the previous sections the experience of a TA being restricted from involvement in the teaching process by the school psychologist was described, “You are a TA. You should not intervene into the process. The teacher is in the classroom.” This case also suggests that the organizational structure and policy inhibits TAs’ professional development by limiting the opportunities for active participation in teaching and learning processes.

The findings revealed that TAs are the group of people who are dealing with a variety of planned and unplanned tasks and mainly try to cope with the obstacles on their own. During the most challenging situations they may seek support from the colleagues of the same position (TAs) or the ones whom they directly responsible to (the head). Furthermore, TAs seeking



support from teachers is subject to the relationships between them that, in their turn, depend on the personal qualities and expertise of mainstream teachers in the field.

Considering the analyzed data, intensive workload, organizational structure and policies as well as the possession of professional skills and knowledge were identified as the challenges of TAs. School administration, in particular department level leaders, and peers (TAs) were recognized as the main sources of support.

### **Professional Development and Promotion**

The analysed data suggests several factors influence the professional development of TAs. Overall, the professional development opportunities are of constant concern and interest of TAs. According to Interviewee 2, she always thinks of it,

Mən həmişə bu haqda [peşəkar inkişaf] düşünürəm və, əlbəttə ki, daim yeniliklərə, biliklərə açığam. İstərdim öyrənmək. [I always think about it [professional development] and, of course, I am always open to innovation and getting new knowledge. I would like to learn.]

Interviewee 7 mentioned that she addresses the related people to be allowed to join the available seminars and trainings,

Görsəm ki, müəllimlərə elan ediblər ki, treyninq var və ya vorkşop, mən mütləq koordinatora müarciət edirəm ki, mənə də qoşulmağa icazə versinlər.[ When I see that there is a training or workshop announcement for teachers, the same moment I apply to the coordinator and ask for permission to join as well.]

The provided reflections demonstrate that TAs are open and passionate to join different professional development opportunities and acquire new skills and knowledge.

The first factor identified across the participants is the *time limit* as, also mentioned in previous parts, TAs experience intense workload and very little time and energy is left for advancement opportunities. As said by Interviewee 9, “During the day I can hardly complete my direct responsibilities. Especially, working with younger students requires more input and efforts from me which leaves me without energy by the end of the day.” Only one participant said that she has the set periods when she can visit the classes of mainstream and subject teachers of different grade levels and benefit from *observing their teaching techniques and practices* which was another factor identified during the conversation. According to Interviewee 5, “Every term we can select lessons of any three teachers, even from another year groups, to attend and observe.” Several TAs reported that they can only improve from demo lessons conducted once or twice a year and receive professional feedback with recommendations. As remarked by Interviewee 8, “The head of the primary asks us to deliver a demo lesson once in every term. Lead teachers and a principal usually visit our classes and provide feedback on the strategies and methods used during the lesson.” Both samples suggest that to some extent the organizational policy maintains the opportunities for professional development within TAs’ roles and responsibilities.

Another factor that affects the development of TAs is the limited *opportunities to practise* their skills. All the interviewees stressed the degree of involvement into active practice of teaching as one of the essential factors for their professional development. According to several respondents (Interviewee 1, Interviewee 7), it is not enough to observe and attend the lessons of teachers but be assigned to lead at least one of the secondary subjects. Interviewee 1 shared her opinion,

We do have SP [study time] where they complete homework, but may be, for example TAs can teach Social Studies or Global Perspectives, there are no so hard topics... It will be better if we have a subject to teach.

*Restriction by grade level* was another circumstance that two TAs (Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 5) specified during the interviews. One of them reflected,

My speech and speaking skills become poor because we use simple vocabulary. Most of the time we communicate with children and mainly say “Line up. Let’s go. Don’t do it. That’s fine.” Due to this, I am not satisfied with my speaking skills.

It is deducted that working mainly within the same grade level negatively affects the language skills of TAs.

Interviewee 2 expressed her concern of being limited by the content of her grade level and not having opportunity to be exposed to context of various and more diverse levels,

Bilirsiz, mən bugün birinci sinifdəyəm sə, birinci sinfin kitablarından kənar kitab oxuya bilmirəm çünki işim buna yol vermir. Proses bunu tələb edir. [You know, if I am working in the first grade today, I cannot read books behind the first grade level because my job does not allow it. The process requires it.]

The given examples infer that TAs do not have enough opportunities to benefit from the academic environment as a whole and, as a result of this factor, do not feel confident to take the lead or consider themselves as equal professionals in relation to other teachers.

The *financial factor* that influences on opportunities for participating in professional development outside the school was indicated by a pair of participants (Interviewee 7 and Interviewee 9) who pointed that low salary prevents them from joining worthwhile professional development programmes and get certified. Interviewee 7 mentioned that “maşımız o gədər də

yüksək deyil, amma bizdən IELTS, TKT sertifikatları gözləyirlər, tələb edirlər. [Our salary is not as high but we are expected and required to receive IELTS and TKT certificates.] It is concluded that the wages of TAs cannot cover the professional development and qualification requirements set by the school administration.

As the experience of some of the interviewees showed, it is mainly them who show initiative and seek for support in professional development. For example, one of them addressed the administration, saying, “I want to be a mainstream teacher. Please teach me, explain to me... Not everyone is good ... in the beginning,” while Interviewee 1 noted, “I support my development through self-study. The provided in-service trainings are not quite relevant for me as an educator.” It is suggested that the opportunities and content of professional development at school does not cover the needs of TAs.

As the result of participants’ reflection on the professional development and promotion opportunities, their needs for improvement are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2

*TAs’ Needs for Professional Development*

Needed area for improvement	Mentioned by participant	Quote
Language skills	Interviewee 5	There are many things I would like to improve related to my profession... Because I feel I am not satisfied with my speaking skills. I am not confident. I would like to use more academic vocabulary. One of the ways is to get IELTS.
Methodology	Interviewee 7	Müəllimliyə aid olan... Metodika, sinfin odarəolunması və təşkili. TESOL kimi... [Related to teaching... Methodology,

		classroom management and organization. Like TESOL.]
Psychology	Interviewee 2	Məktəbdə autizmlı uşaqlar var, bir az psixoloji dəstəyə ehtiyacı olan uşaqlar da var. Bilirsiniz, biz bu sahə üzrə – sıhv bu psixoloji dəstək – tədris bölməsində almamışıq deyə, bir az bəzən çətinliklərimiz olur. [At school, we have some students with autism spectrum or students with special educational needs. We are not qualified in this area and, thus, sometimes experience challenges.]
Computer skills	Interviewee 9	During COVID-19 pandemic, lessons became online and we needed to learn additional computer skills. They were mainly fun games, puzzles, etc. I would like to learn more about how to prepare nice report formats in Word or Excel.
Official documentation	Interviewee 6	Planların yazılması mənə çətin gəlir. Heç vaxt iştirak eləməmişəm... Sənədlərlə bağlı... [It is challenging for me to write lesson plans because I have never participated in this process... Documentation related processes...]
Opportunities for regular exchange of experience	Interviewee 4	Я бы хотела узнать про то, как устроена работа в международной программе на примере английского сектора. Потому что у них учебная деятельность немного по-другому выстроена. [I would like to know how the work in the international program is arranged using the example of

		the English department. Because their teaching approach is structured a little bit differently.]
Need for professional feedback	Interviewee 8	I am a relatively newly qualified teacher and working as a TA does not give me a chance to teach a lesson. But I want to receive feedback from experienced teachers or the head.
Leading a subject	Interviewee 1	TA can teach Social Studies or Global Perspectives, there are not so hard topics. This will help to improve skills and gain confidence.

### **Relationships with Mainstream Teachers**

In answering the third research question, the collected data suggests that the relationships with mainstream teacher have an important influence on professional development of TAs. The relationships that TAs experience with mainstream teachers define the effectiveness of TAs in fulfilling their role responsibilities and may influence their motivation and, as a result, promote or prevent their development as professionals. According to Interviewee 7,

Əlbəttə, bizim münasibətlərimiz iş prosesinə və əməkdaşlığımıza təsir edir. O, hər dəfə mənə dəstək olur, assistent gözündə görmür. Həttə mənə şərait yaradıb ki, mən əlavə dərslər keçə bilim. Bu cür münasibət olanda, əlbəttə ki, bir-birimizi yaxşı başa düşürük, bir komanda kimi işləyirik. İki dost kimi yox. Amma bütün siniflərdə eyni vəziyyət deyil. Mən şanslıyam ki, elə müəllim ilə çalışıram. [Of course, our relations affect the work process and our cooperation. She always supports me and does not see me as an assistant. She even created such an opportunity for me that I can teach extra lessons. When we have such an attitude, of course, we understand each other well and work as a team. We

are like two friends. But not all classes are the same. I am lucky to work with such a teacher.]

This suggests that interpersonal relationships may contribute to the effective teamwork as well as create opportunities for greater involvement of TAs in teaching and learning processes.

As remarked by the majority of interviewed TAs, the good interpersonal relationships may also influence the perceptions of students and parents regarding the role of TAs. Interviewee 7 shared,

Uşaqlar mənə “assistant” deyəndə, o onlara deyir ki, “O, müəllim köməkçisidir. Bu deməkdir ki, mən dərsləri gəlməyəndə, o mənim işimi yerinə yetirəcək, dərslərimi keçəcək.” O, nəyin ki, şagirdlər qabağında, həm də valideynlər, müəllimlərin qabağında elə dəstək olur. [When children call me an “assistant”, she tells them, "She is a teaching assistant. This means that when I do not come to class, she will do my job and teach the lesson." She is so supportive not only in front of students, but also in front of parents and teachers.]

As stated by Interviewee 1, “I think in every work we need to start from the beginning. If you are starting as TA, it is the beginning. It is good only in case the mainstream teacher gives you a chance and you have good relationships... If our [TA and mainstream teacher] relationships were not so good, I could not feel very well here [at school]. It will affect my career...”. According to Interviewee 7, the mainstream teacher tries to publicly communicate that TA is also a qualified professional and even proposed to assign some support classes to be led by a TA. “She [mainstream teacher] observed my demo lessons and provided with support on how I can improve. After several demo lessons, she even asked the head of the primary to assign me to teach support ESL lessons.” It is surmised that if the relationships with mainstream

teachers are good, it is worth working as a TA because the supportive environment can give TA an opportunity to learn from a more experienced person and grow as a professional.

In addition, these relationships influence the intention of TAs to seek for help from the mainstream teacher when facing challenges of different types. The majority of the interviewees stated that 'if the relationships are good, they can ask for help from mainstream teacher and expect to receive it'.

On the other hand, as noted by Interviewee 2, poor relationships with mainstream teacher restricts her activity as she cannot openly express her ideas and propose any suggestions related to daily activities, impose limits on creativity and, as a result, decreases motivation:

Elə olur ki, mən sıxılıram. Hansısa bir ideyam və ya təklifim var, mən onu tam rahatlıqla deyə bilmirəm, ortaya qoya bilmirəm. Bilirsiniz, o içimdəki sərbəstliyimi, azadlığımı hiss eləmirəm... 1-2 dəfə elə situasiya olub ki, mənim adi bir ideyam var idi. Misal üçün, lövhəyə bir şəkil hazırlayıb əlavə edim, sürpriz kimi olsun. Amma bu yalnız anlaşıldı. Artıq sistem nə tələb edirsə, onu da yerinə yetirirəm. [It sometimes happens that I feel restricted. I have an idea or suggestion but I cannot express or present it easily. You know, I do not have the feeling of freedom inside me. Once or twice there was a situation when I had a simple idea. For example, I wanted to design and attach a picture on the pin board, as a surprise. But this proposal was misunderstood. Now, I only do what the system requires to.]

It is being inferred that the poor relationship with mainstream teacher may negatively affect the creativity of TA as well as their desire to show initiative in the classroom.

Appealing to a mainstream teacher is conditional as most of the interviewees associated it with the level and quality of their relationships with mainstream teachers. For example,



Interviewee 7 stated that she usually asks for help a ‘mainstream teacher who used to be a TA because she understands how TAs really struggle during the workday’. In addition, Interviewee 9 reflected, “I think if the character of a teacher is good, she will help me and we can collaborate more effectively.” It is assumed that the supportive relationships with mainstream teacher depends on teacher’s personality and their professional background and experience.

Taking into account the revealed patterns, it is assumed that interpersonal relationships between TAs and mainstream teachers play an essential role in maintaining the supportive environment. If the relationships with mainstream teachers are not as good, TAs would not approach them in case of need for support. It was identified that according to TAs’ perceptions the interpersonal relationships between TAs and mainstream teachers depend on the personal characteristics and professional background of mainstream teachers.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of TAs in primary schools of Azerbaijan and the factors affecting their job satisfaction by means of their experiences, perceptions regarding their role responsibilities, and work relationships with teachers. In addition, the exploration of factors identified in the literature and raising the awareness of school community about the possible challenges and needs of TAs aims to strengthen the purpose of the study.

Many of the findings from the given research are considered to be relatively consistent with the conducted literature review. In particular, the ambiguity and inconsistency in the role clarity of TAs (Webster 2013; Jardí et al. ,2022) was observed as TAs shared different perceptions related to their role responsibilities.

Discussing the findings according to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959), the following motivators were revealed: work itself and environment, interpersonal relationships with peers and administration. Meanwhile, working conditions, salary, organizational policies, recognition and promotion were identified as hygiene actors among interviewed TAs.

TAs in primary schools of Baku in their overall responses shared motivators, such as work itself and environment, and expressed their satisfaction with these factors. Positive and comfortable working environment at school increased TAs' motivation and efficiency which also was identified by Bushiri (2014). Such factors as recognition and promotion did not lead to satisfaction among the majority of respondents (Herzberg, 1959). The limited opportunities for professional development and growth that TAs experience affect their self-esteem as they do not feel confident in applying effective teaching strategies and, thus, avoid showing initiative for being actively involved in the academic processes. The given study revealed that TAs do not perceive themselves as the ones having authority in teaching and learning activities and, as a result, avoid taking responsibility over the academic processes. However, these factors are supposed to increase employee motivation according to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959). It was concluded that it is important for TAs to have opportunities to be exposed to active teaching practice - experience of leading rather than helping – in order to be more productive at work (Seyfarth, 2008). Moreover, it was identified that TAs are not considered as a decision-making staff within the classroom and school as a whole which is consistent with other literature findings (Lehane, 2016; Blatchford et al., 2012).

Analyzing hygiene factors, it was revealed that organization policy and working conditions caused dissatisfaction among most of the TAs. It was observed that if basic physiological needs such as opportunity for having meal are not met, TAs can hardly be

motivated to show commitment and, thus, move to the next level and fulfil their higher-level needs. However, some respondents expressed their fulfilment with such factors as relationships with peers and administration that led to satisfaction rather than dissatisfaction as per Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959).

Interestingly, the study identified the existing relationship between Motivators and Hygiene factors that were not present in the literature review. It was identified that the sense of connectedness is dependent on the work relationships between TAs and mainstream teachers. As many TAs mentioned, the vast majority of the processes and activities at school are completed together with mainstream teachers and the degree of TAs involvement and support depends on the interpersonal relations between these groups of employees. These findings reveal that there is a dependency between Motivators and Hygiene factors that if both factors are present, they increase TAs' job satisfaction. As was also reported in the literature, the relationship with co-workers is considered the chief factor in enhancing the employee engagement at work (SHRM, 2016). Moreover, Jardí et al. (in press) stressed the importance of respect, trust and valuing one another in maintaining the effective cooperation between teachers and TAs.

Furthermore, the hygiene factors of salary and organizational policies were associated with dissatisfaction. According to Herzberg (1959), they are not motivators and are perceived as obstacles in fulfilling job effectively by limiting TAs in their professional development opportunities and, thus, contributes to dissatisfaction.

Such factor as role overlap (Drake et al., 2003) was not revealed during the study.

The given research identified that TAs' motivation and enthusiasm is predominantly dependent on both, Hygiene and Motivator factors (Herzberg, 1959). Across all the participants, the importance of fulfilment of job content and job context factors was identified as mutual

contributions to employees' motivation. Paying closer attention and taking all the above-mentioned factors into consideration, can help to maintain the healthy environment for TAs' and their development as professionals.

### **Conclusion**

The main aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of TAs in primary schools of Baku, Azerbaijan and the factors affecting their job satisfaction by means of their experiences, perceptions regarding their role responsibilities, and work relationships with teachers. The results of the study revealed that the TAs were not well pleased with such hygiene factors as salary, working conditions and organizational policies and considered them as the source of job dissatisfaction. The findings also indicated that Motivators were the key contributors to the professional development and growth of TAs as employees and included such factor as work itself. Interestingly, some identified factors, in particular, relationships with peers and administration were contributing to satisfaction while recognition and promotion were mentioned as sources of dissatisfaction. The study revealed the direct dependency between the work relationships between TAs and mainstream teachers and the level of inclusion and involvement of TAs at the workplace.

### **Implications**

The identified findings greatly contribute to the literature on Azerbaijan as there was no previously conducted research on TAs' perceptions and the influence of the relationships with mainstream teachers on TAs' professional growth and commitment.

The results of the given study can be used by the school administration in order to develop and implement the professional development programmes for TAs within the

educational institution. This will enhance TAs' productivity through meeting their needs and supporting their establishment as equally competent employees as teachers.

In addition, the findings of the research may be utilized to revise the school HR policies and regulations. Bringing more clarity to the work responsibilities of TAs and effectively communicating them can eliminate the ambiguity in defining TAs' role and shape an accurate image of theirs as employees among all the members of school community. Also, consideration of more opportunities for practicing their teaching skills will maintain the more active inclusion of TAs into teaching and learning processes as well as aid their growth as professionals.

Finally, using the collected data and the results of the study may help raise awareness of members of school community about the role responsibilities and work specifics of TAs.

The aforementioned suggestions may not only serve the organization itself but also contribute to the development of human capital in the country as a whole.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Taking into account that TAs and their role in education is not well explored, the following research may be focused on:

- exploration of students' perceptions on the role of TAs
- comparative study of TAs' and teachers' perceptions using mixed methods research
- study on the parents' understandings and attitudes towards TAs
- repeat the research on TAs' perceptions with larger sample size

Furthermore, investigation of the non-directional hypothesis exploring the relationship between such variables as the degree of students' exposure to TAs' support and their academic achievements could contribute to the better understanding of TAs' role.

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## Appendix 1.

### Consent form

<b>Informed Consent Form</b>	
<b>Research Investigator:</b>	Yuliya Aliyeva
<b>Research Topic:</b>	<i>The Role and Perceptions of Teaching Assistants in Primary Schools of Azerbaijan</i>
<b>Institution:</b>	ADA University
<b>Contact number:</b>	(+994 50) 528 84 74
<b>Email:</b>	yuliya.aliyeva@yahoo.com
<p>Dear Participant,</p> <p>This is an invitation to participate in an interview that is a part of a research study on the role and perceptions of teaching assistants (TAs) in primary private and/or international schools of Azerbaijan. You are invited to take part in a research study and contribute to the exploration and knowledge creation about the perceptions of TAs on their role and the influence of interpersonal working relationships between mainstream teachers and TAs on their personal and professional growth. Participation involves taking part in the interviews, providing related documents and reviewing the analysed data. The obtained information will help to raise the awareness of educational community about the needs and challenges of TAs and can be used by the education institutions to better support TAs in their employment, development and career growth.</p> <p>The given study is entitled <i>The Role and Perceptions of Teaching Assistants in Primary Schools of Azerbaijan</i> which is the part of a Master's thesis and is conducted by Yuliya Aliyeva, under the supervision of Dr. Jeyran Aghayeva, professor at ADA University.</p> <p>It is expected that about 10 people will participate in the research study. Each interview will last approximately one hour, depending on how long your responses are and be audio-recorded using the mobile voice recorder. You may choose the language of the interview – English, Azerbaijani or Russian. Regardless your choice, all the collected data will be translated into English at the end. After the collected data is analyzed, you will be asked to review the researcher's interpretations in order to ensure that your responses were understood correctly. The disguised extracts from your interview may be quoted in the final version of the paper. In</p>	

addition to the interview, you will be asked to share documents with the researcher such as photo and video materials, personal/professional blog webpage, received written feedback and/or personal notes and reflections.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and anonymous. You may refuse to participate or you may choose to answer only the questions you feel comfortable answering - this will not be disclosed to anyone and will not affect your standing at the workplace. At any point, you may withdraw as a participant from the study. Moreover, you can withdraw the permission to use data from the interview within two weeks after the interview.

Any direct identification information, such as your name and workplace, will be removed from the data when the responses are analyzed. Only the reviewers who agree to the terms of confidentiality will have access to the analysed and coded data where there will be no direct identification information and your name will be hidden. After your responses are analyzed and built into themes, they will compose the part of a Master's thesis research paper. In the future, this paper may be presented or published publicly.

A final copy of the study will not include your identification information and your name.

Every attempt will be made to protect participant confidentiality to the maximum extent allowed by law.

If you would like a summary of our final report or have any further questions, please contact the researcher, Yuliya Aliyeva.

Thank you for participating!

<b>Research participant</b>	<b>Researcher</b>

I agree to participate in this study and allow my interview to be audio-recorded.

-----

Name

-----

Signature of participant

-----

Date

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

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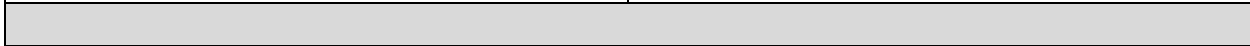
Name

-----

Signature of researcher

-----

Date



## Appendix 2.

### Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
<b>Research Topic:</b>	<i>The Role and Perceptions of Teaching Assistants in Primary Schools of Azerbaijan</i>
<b>Date of interview:</b>	
<b>Place:</b>	
<b>Start time:</b>	
<b>End time:</b>	
<b>Interviewer:</b>	Yuliya Aliyeva
<b>Interviewee:</b>	
<b>Language of the interview:</b>	
Introduction	
<p>The researcher greets and thanks the participant for accepting the invitation to participate in the study and asks the interviewee what language is most convenient for her/him. The researcher shares personal background information in order to initiate the conversation.</p>	
Purpose	
<p>The researcher explains that the purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of teaching assistants in primary schools of Azerbaijan.</p>	
Procedures	
<p>The researcher explains that the interview will last approximately one hour, be audio-recorded and then transcribed. After the collected data is analysed, the interviewee will be contacted and asked to review the researcher's interpretations and confirm their validity. The final outcome will be included in the researcher's Master's thesis research paper which may be delivered to public at the later stage.</p>	
Consent	

The interviewee is reminded that the participation in this study is completely voluntary and is asked to read and sign the informed consent form. The researcher will also ask for verbal agreement to participate in the study and remind that the withdrawal is possible at any point. The interviewee is being informed that she/he has the right to refuse to answer the questions she/he feels uncomfortable with. It is assured that the participant identity and privacy will be protected and disguised by replacing participant's name with a code (Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.).

#### Dialogue

Preliminary interview questions are given below:

1. Please describe your academic and professional background.
2. Could you please describe your work responsibilities?
3. Please describe your regular workday.
4. Please describe your involvement in teaching, learning and any decision-making processes.
5. What are the challenges you face during the day?
6. Who, if anyone, has provided you with encouragement and/or strategies for overcoming obstacles in your work?
7. What are the most important factors that influence your professional development?
8. What professional development opportunities do you have?
9. How do you feel while you are performing your responsibilities? How does work environment affect your effectiveness?
10. Please describe your collaboration patterns with school community members.
11. If I had asked your student to describe your role, what could they have told me?
12. If I had asked a parent to describe your role, what could they have told me?
13. If I had asked a vice-principal to describe your role, what could they have told me?
14. What types of feedback have you received from others related to your personal and professional skills and abilities?
15. How effective is your collaboration with mainstream teacher(s)?
16. What are the factors that help you in your professional development?
17. If you could have any additional knowledge, experiences or training to improve yourself, what would it be? Why?
18. Please describe the possibilities for your career growth at school.
19. Before we conclude the interview, are there any other thoughts or reflections you want to share or, may be, were not covered during the interview?

#### Conclusion

The researcher thanks the interviewee for the participation and stops the recording.