Students' perspectives on paraprofessional support in German inclusive schools: Results from an exploratory interview study with students in Northrhine Westfalia

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Abstract

Paraprofessional support is increasingly implemented in schools as part of inclusive school development in many countries, primarily for students with Special Educational Needs. Educational research has shown growing interest in paraprofessional support in inclusive schools, focusing on the conceptual design and professionalization of this supporting role. However, the voices of students with paraprofessional support have seldomly been heard within the inclusive education discourse. Therefore, this research article presents research results of a study in Northrhine-Westfalia (Germany) which reconstructed paraprofessional support practices from the perspective of students. In this paper we depict exemplary sequences which show the students' perspective on learning in class among students who are assigned paraprofessional support.

Keywords: Inclusive education, students' perspective, paraprofessional support, teaching assistants

Introduction

Inclusion is a process that focuses on participation and the reduction of social barriers and obstacles that might lead to inequality (Ainscow, 2010; Allan, 2003). These barriers might arise by the way education systems deal with heterogeneity (migration-based, disability-based, or gender-based). From a social science perspective, inclusion and exclusion are 'two sides of the same coin' (Kronauer, 2010). Consequently, educational inequality cannot be eliminated by simply bringing together different students from special institutions into the regular education system. Rather, differences are social practices which are constituted by interactions and also by roles and responsibilities within the classroom (Sturm, 2012).

Regarding inclusive education in Germany, in the years since the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009, an implementation process has developed. This process is increasingly motivated by education policy aiming to achieve inclusion (Klemm, 2014), mainly focusing, however, on increasing the integration of students with special educational needs in general schools. This focus is in accordance with the findings of Kozleski, Artiles and Waitoller (2011) for the international context: "In most cases the inclusive education movement has focused on students with disabilities access to and participation in normative contexts (i.e. nondisabled cultures)" (p. 3). Hence, it is a challenging process, to change practices from seeing inclusion as a technical problem focusing on the integration of students with Special Educational Needs, to seeing inclusion as cultural politics within a comprehensive whole-school approach (Slee & Weiner, 2011). This shift places new, complex demands (e.g. in terms of cooperation) on stakeholders in schools, especially on ambivalent roles such as paraprofessionals, who are the subject of controversial discussions among international experts (Chambers, 2015; Sharma & Salend, 2016).

It is therefore important to focus on practices in the context of inclusive schooling and to examine how stakeholders' actions within their social and professional roles in educational organizations may produce inequality. A role that gains attention as part of inclusive school development in Germany and internationally is that of school assistants (Butt, 2016; Laubner, Lindmeier, & Lübeck, 2017; Sharma & Salend, 2016). Therefore, in this article we investigate this role from the student perspective, because students are important stakeholders in schools and are substantially involved in social practices.

Empirical research on school assistants in Germany and internationally

A discussion of the history of school assistants in Germany (Laubner et al., 2017; Lindmeier & Polleschner, 2014) is beyond the scope of this article. However, it can be stated that they play a substantial role in German schools by supporting students identified as having special educational needs and those needing additional support. However, the use of school assistants is not without controversy. There are variable effects of their support, which can include either enabling educational and social participation or increasing the risk of social stigmatization for the students receiving assistance (see Köpfer, 2016).

German literature reviews (Lübeck & Demmer, 2017; Schmidt, 2016) show that research interest in school assistants at first focused on the field of special education. It is now increasingly shifting towards inclusive educational contexts. International empirical educational research has for some time now focused on integration assistants and teacher/teaching assistants to support teachers in general schools (see Salend & Sharma, 2016). Hereby, contradictions were found between the 'autonomy and dependence' of students with special educational needs as well as the benefits of this paraprofessional role in terms of achievement (Blatchford et al. 2012).

Statistically, the number of school assistants has risen greatly in recent years. This tendency can be found in several European Countries, e.g. Finland (Takala, 2007), Italy (Devecchi, Dettori, Doveston, Sedgwick, & Jament, 2012) and Germany (Dworschak, 2016) – but also internationally, e.g. Australia and the USA (Butt & Lowe, 2012; Giangreco, 2013). For the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, Germany, research shows that slightly more than half of all individuals working as school assistants have no professional background in education and were prepared for their tasks only through conversations or a training course (Henn et al., 2014). A descriptive survey by Lindemann and Schlarmann (2016) confirms the absence of clearly structured initial training for school assistants. This heterogeneous level of professionalization leads to cooperation difficulties between teachers and school assistants, as shown by a qualitative interview study by Lübeck and Heinrich (2016).

For school assistants, international studies confirm that this can result in a heterogeneous range of options, which in turn can lead to confusion on how to provide assistance (Butt & Lowe, 2012; Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Giangreco, 2010; Köpfer, 2013; Fritzsche & Köpfer, 2019). These studies found a low degree of collaboration between the teacher and the school assistant. This lack of collaboration can lead to the school assistant working solely with the child with special educational needs, an arrangement which signals other students that the child with special needs is unapproachable (Heinrich & Lübeck, 2013). An ethnographic study conducted in the Canadian province of New Brunswick (Köpfer, 2013) also found evidence of this latent stigmatization: despite a change in terminology from ‘integration aide’ to ‘teacher assistant’, paraprofessionals were less involved in teacher assistance than in providing close support to children with high support needs.

So far, no empirical data are available on students' perspectives regarding school assistants in Germany. This area requires further research (Lübeck & Demmer, 2017) as students are the recipients of paraprofessional support measures such as school assistants, however, are seldom invited to share their voice in research. Initial studies in other countries show that students who have been assigned in-school assistants retrospectively describe them as a 'protector from bullying' or 'mother', revealing a hierarchical but close relationship to the teaching assistant (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005). Considering the growing number of school assistants in inclusion-oriented schools in Germany (Dworschak 2016), studies should be conducted in Germany in order to examine the social practices and roles in inclusive schools in a methodologically-sound manner and to gain knowledge about the production of differences that may potentially lead to disadvantages. Studies focusing on students' voices can be of particular value as they reveal insight into their perspective of the necessity and usefulness of the designed role of school assistants.

In response to this need, an initial research project was conducted by the Technical University of Dortmund and the University of Duisburg-Essen as part of the exploratory study 'School Assistants from the Student Perspective' (SAS). In light of these research needs with respect to inclusion and school assistants, this paper deals with the students' perspective on school assistants in inclusive schools.

Methodological framework and methodological requirements

Combining childhood- and school research

Our research question is situated within two disciplines: childhood research and school research. School research historically examined school and teaching in a largely adult-centered manner, childhood research primarily studied the lives of children outside of school (Heinzel, 2005). However, children's school lives and the student role are

research topics addressed in both childhood and school research (Breidenstein & Prengel, 2005). The importance of these topics has been recognized both internationally (Corsaro, 1997) and nationally since the mid-1990s (Föllinger-Albers, 1992; Panagiotopoulou & Brügelmann, 2003).

In this context, difference research within social science has proved to be a relevant methodological approach (Budde, Dlugosch & Sturm, 2017). Difference research considers difference to be a social action. It views subjects as actors who are actively involved in the (re)production of posited differences (Mecheril & Plössner , 2009). Differences are no longer seen as natural but understood as socially generated within a given cultural context, as suggested by the concept of 'doing difference' (West & Fenstermaker, 1995). Difference is therefore not ontologically tied to persons as a quasi-natural characteristic, but is associated with the goal of reconceptualization. Therefore, difference is seen as an "ongoing interactional accomplishment" (West & Fenstermaker, 1995, p. 9).

In this light, the focus of childhood research becomes how children *are perceived as children* (Honig, 2009b). It examines the social practices "that produce the social and cultural differences between children and adults" (Honig, 2009a, p. 19). This perspective makes it possible to examine the spaces of childhood created by differentiation practices and see children as actors involved in creating their societal and living conditions (Bollig, Betz, & Esser, 2017). It is therefore important to consider children as relevant actors in the generation of sociological knowledge (Alanen, 1997) and to address them in research contexts.

In this context school research asks questions about the role of students in constituting the school and analyzes school and in-class events by reconstructing the actions of child stakeholders. This shifts the focus of research to the everyday routines,

everyday knowledge bases, and cultural practices of students. In considering the actions of (child) stakeholders, school research does not just focus on the production of generational relationships (in the sense of 'doing generation'). Rather, it aims more generally to research all processes in which "social realities are produced by resorting to difference categories" (Mecheril & Plössner, 2009, p. 200).

Societal power structures and inequities are tied into the construction of social practices (Bourdieu 1991). In the school context, inequality is largely manifested in the form of hierarchical dependencies of different stakeholders. Childhood and school research should consequently consider these power relationships and examine which resources are available to individual stakeholders in order to illuminate their perspectives (Mecheril & Plössner, 2009) and reveal implicit standards and inequality-producing actions. Before this backdrop, this study examines processes of 'doing difference' in the practices of students in school and in-class situations in the context of inclusion and school assistants.

Research methodology: The documentary method

This study applies principles of difference research. In this view, school and teaching are understood as social practices in which differences are continuously (re)produced. In order to analyze these processes of 'doing difference' in a methodologically sound manner, this research project is based on the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2014; Sturm, 2015), which itself is rooted in the praxeological sociology of knowledge (Bohnsack, 2017). This analytical perspective focuses on the process through which orientations, attitudes, or world views are generated through social practices, as revealed intersubjectively by the actors (Bohnsack, 2017). Hence, in social actions the socio-cultural practices of a social group, which are based on social constructions, are

revealed through empirical reconstructive procedures (Bohnsack, 2014; Sturm, 2015). In this respect, the documentary method does not reconstruct content that is 'objectively' or 'immanently' expressed in statements or explanations. Instead, it determines the "conjunctive spaces of experience" (Bohnsack, 2010, p. 103), the collective orientations, practices, or attitudes implicit within a given statement.

With regard to this article's research question, the documentary method allows us to reconstruct the situational or long-term orientations, practices, and attitudes regarding school assistants in in-class situations voiced by students who have been assigned school assistants. In accordance with the findings of childhood research focusing on students' orientations, this study focuses on the "permanent participation of children in interactions, social processes, and cultural contexts under the conditions of childhood ..." (Heinzel, Kränz-Nagel, & Mierendorff, 2012, p. 15).

Problem-focused interviews with children and adolescents

In this study, problem-centered and child-centered interviews (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2013; Witzel, 2000) were conducted. Problem-centered interviews allow respondents to report facts and situations in a narrative manner in response to an open prompt, add examples and descriptions, choose their own focus areas and perspectives, and thus independently generate the course, logic, and structure of the narrative. These processes take place within a thematic framework defined by the prompt. The interviewer encourages respondents to go into greater detail and fully exploit their "narrative potential" (Nohl, 2012, p. 16) by prompting them and posing relevant further questions. This study attempts to reconstruct students' perspectives who have been assigned school assistants. Our research goal thus necessitates a methodological approach that acknowledges children's competencies and modes of expression.

Little empirical data on German children's narrative competence in research situations is available, but initial evidence from other countries (Nentwig-Gesemann, 2013) suggests that the "competence of the adult conversation partner" (p. 764) is essential in this regard. Therefore, children and adolescents must be approached with an attitude characterized by "respect, attentiveness, and true interest" (Andresen, 2012, p. 138), as the manner in which the interview is conducted affects their ability to express their interpretations of themselves and their world and thus the orientations that guide their actions. In this study, we met this objective by giving the interviewed students an open-ended, narrative-generating prompt aimed at having them discuss situations experienced at school in a familiar narrative context. We also posed additional, more specific questions on learning in class to help them express their logic and exhaust their narrative potential.

The study "School Assistants from the Student Perspective" (SAS)

The exploratory study 'School Assistants from the Student Perspective (SAS)' arose from research cooperation between the Technical University of Dortmund and the University of Duisburg-Essen conducted from October 2015 through March 2016. The study was conducted in comprehensive schools (with a school concept focusing on inclusive education) in Northrhine-Westfalia (Germany), in the region of Dortmund and Essen. We interviewed students between grade 5 and 8, ranging from age 11 to 17. The results of the study are presented below, giving insight into two example interview sequences (see Table 1 and Table 2) and discussing them with reference to the international research discourse. The examples refer to in-class situations and reveal students' perspectives on school assistants.

Table 1

Interview Extract - Learning support

Line #	Speaker	Dialogue
1	I	Yes, let us (1) think about how- (.) [err] how are you supported (.) in learning (.)
2		are you getting support?
3	S	[err] (2) yes (.) from Mrs. Weber (.) and [breathes in]
4	I	[hm]
5	S	one day we had a worksheet that was totally easy as pie (1)
6	I	@okay,@ (2) [uh-huh] (1) [err] and did Mrs. Weber help you with that? Or did
7		you do it on your own?
8	S	[hm] (3) noo (1) i did that all by @myself@ (.)
9	I	[uh-huh] (.)
10	S	Aand once we had to do a worksheet (.) with (.) hamsters and birds (1) [breathes
11		in] and i had that done alreeadyyy (.) and i did that almost twice but then i took a different one (.)
12	I	[hm]
13	S	and then (.) i did that in no time (1)
14	I	Okay, (.) okay, (.) and at times, when you're not making good progress (.) [err]
15		then (.) you said you get supported by Mrs. Weber (.) maybe you tell about
16		how- how does she support you [err] how do you learn together?
17	S	Well then (2) yes (6) [err] (.) when i have [emm] a defficult problem (.) exercise
18		(.) she [err] then she always heps me (.) [err] (1) she- [err] one time i had an
19		exercise that was (.) seventy miinus (1) [err] ffffifty [err] (.) and i just didn't know that (2)
20	I	[hm] (1) okay, and so, what did you do then (.) when you didn't know that (.)
21	S	[err] (.) asked Mrs. Weber and (.) then [err] (1) she told my that it is twenty (1)
22		and (.) then i wrote that down (1) and that was it (1)
23	I	Okay, she just told you the- the answer (1)

The sequence in Table 1 indicates that a student (whom we call Oscar) initially classifies tasks at school into the binary categories of 'easy vs. hard' and 'fast vs. slow'. He uses these categories to assess his educational success. This reveals a perspective of independent participation in class as reflected in successfully solving tasks of a certain

degree of difficulty within a given time period. The student appears to have internalized this learning concept insofar as he evaluates his learning success in terms of a short processing time. He believes that successful participation in class is associated with a visible result, documented by a completed worksheet. This reflects an implicit educational framework that evaluates successful learning processes on the basis of educational results; increased individual knowledge or skills are not a relevant measure of participation in class.

Before this backdrop, the student elaborates on a situation in which he received additional support in solving a task. The student's denial that he has received support – stating instead that he completed the worksheet *all by himself* – documents a strive for independent learning, which is associated with success. In this respect, the need for support is posited as differing from successful educational participation. However, support is considered here to be a necessary and relevant measure that is needed for successful completion of a product within the allotted time. The student's discussion of a 'difficult exercise' – solved by Ms. Weber, who tells him the result – reveals a perspective on support as a suitable means of successfully managing participation in class in order to conform to the normative educational framework. In this section, the assistance provided by Ms. Weber helps the student create the documented output, which is a marker of successful learning. Therefore, they can be reconstructed as stakeholders whose actions are intended to meet in-class performance requirements and tasks collaboratively and in conformity with expectations.

Hence, this support in meeting in-class demands is greatly appreciated by the student, as it allows the student to remain in a system based on allocation and selection. However, it is limited by an unspecified strive for autonomy. Consequently, the assistance is only used situationally by the student.

Table 2

Interview Extract - Help from School Assistants

Line #	Speaker	Dialogue
1	I	(.) [mhm] (.) who is involved? During 'Förder'
2	S	[err] the class and my classroom teacher and (.) Mr. Pfingst; my
3		l-integration aide
4	I	[mhm] (1) aaand [eerr] [eer] in both, in 'Förder'
5	S	He is like- he is the whole day with me – like together with me;
6		as long as I'm in school;
7	I	[mhm] (2) okay;
8	S	°mhmyes;°
9	I	[mhm] (.) h-how is this for you? tell me,
10	S	(.) with whom, Mr. Pfingst?
11	I	[mhm]
12	S	(2) Yees = well (2) yes how can I put it he is; (4) well with him it is
13		all right (.) actually quite good; you know [sniffing his
14		nose] (.) he is very kind (.) he helps- he is very helpful too he also helps
15		the other learners (.) although he is responsible only for me but
16		he also helps – (.) well he explains very well; is good understandable and so on.
17		(.) yeees (.) he also is (hmm) joking from time to time; you know?
18		actually yes. (.) well I like him very much;
19	I	L[hm]
20	I	L[hmm]
21		aand (2.) well (.) I would not say, that I would be @excited
22		if he stays longer with me, because well this is a bit; (1)
23		(clicking) well not so thrilling; but; (.) actually I'm exited
24		to have him at the moment; °well° (2) **and** he listens g-good, well
25		(and [ehm err] oh yes [err]) (1) L[mhmm] (.) [mhm]J
26		well, he listens good and he gives them some hints and so on (.) °foor
27		depending on (.) the situation.°
28	I	[mhmm]
29	S	(.) °yes°
30	I	(.) [mhmm] okay; could you tell me a situation w-you are remembering right now,
31		depending on- you said he gives hints depending on how the situation
32		looks like
33	S	(.) yees well there is the situation that when I = I am late,
34		the reason is that I(.) fall asleep
35		(2) In the middle of a lecture (2) yees well then [breathing out] he pats me on the
36		back and says (.) get up; you can do it; (.) you
37		can do it and so on; (1) it was just now; (1) yes you can
38		do it and so on; now put yourself together; y-(.) you can do it till
39		recess and so on; (.) there; (.) and=this really helps that- I
40		did it; before I then (.) was called out
41		because of the interview;

The second example (Table 2) stems from an interview with a 17-year-old student, Max, who has been diagnosed with special educational needs due to behavior and who has

had a school assistant assigned to him for eight years. The example above follows a brief discussion of his morning procedure *before* the start of classes and for which he occasionally arrives late. Max' relationship with the school assistant constitutes itself along a temporal framework, the 'whole day', expressing a consistent togetherness, which is restricted in terms of location by the attribute 'at school'. The school assistant's activities are described using various positive characteristics (nice, willing to help, helps other students as well, explains well in an easy to understand manner, is funny). This list is concluded with an evaluation that 'it is actually fairly good with him'.

Although Max comments that Mr. Pfingst helps other students as well, he emphasizes a possessive form of relationship of Mr. Pfingst to express his exclusive entitlement. However, by noting that he would not be glad to have the assistant stay with him for longer he expresses rejection of and skepticism toward outside support and a desire to emancipate himself. Nevertheless, this skepticism is restricted by weight Max places on the positive effects (e.g. 'tips', line 26) associated with the support by Mr. Pfingst. It becomes clear that Max currently prefers to receive support and therefore accepts the fact that he is assigned a support person – which is perceived of as 'not great'. This indicates a rejection of the support received from the school assistant, complicating the student's simultaneous compliance for reasons of support.

Comparison

The two examples reveal a number of similarities regarding the perspective of students who have been assigned school assistants. First, both students introduce the school assistant as a useful personal support that helps them manage educational situations over which their influence is limited, as well as performance and behavioral requirements. Therefore, the school assistant is associated with the function of providing appreciated and

student-oriented assistance. Both students use the assistance as a coping measure by actively involving school assistants in meeting in-class requirements by means of individualized and personalized support.

A second similarity refers to the students' perspective towards the support received. It is perceived as a deviation from successful participation in class. This reveals a latent rejection of the personal assistance because it involves the student being treated differently from others. Consequently, this results in a dilemma regarding support – it is seen as positive and helps the students meet norm-referenced requirements, but these requirements can only be met if students simultaneously accept being treated formally different from others.

However, the students differ in their management of the chosen situation. Oscar reveals a perspective in which the actions of school assistants serve as a *situational* 'completion aid' for in-class assignments, allowing him to meet a standard of success in in-class education based on documented output in the form of completed worksheets. Max, on the other hand, reveals a perspective on school assistants being engaged in collaboration with the student that is unrestricted in terms of space and time. In this example, school success is not defined as output-oriented performance but rather as the physical demands of an in-class education unrelated to the student's interests. In this case, the bond between the school assistant and the student is given the form of an idealized 'alter ego', which is ascribed positive attributes throughout. This relationship reveals an internalization and appropriation of the school assistant by the student that is not temporary and situational but rather persists throughout the entire school day.

Conclusions

These examples of the study 'School Assistants from the Student Perspective' (SAS) reveal insight into practices in Northrhine-Westfalian inclusive schools. In-class education is revealed to be organized on the basis of achievement and selection. In this context, school assistants are regarded by students as positive and helpful support as well as close allies who allow them to meet expectations according to achievement. This confirms findings in the German (Ehrenberg & Lindmeier 2020) as well as in the international context (Broer, Doyle, & Giangreco, 2005) which reconstruct school assistants as close allies to students on peer level (e.g. as 'second mother'). The results of the SAS study elaborate this social relationship emphasizing the relevance of academic expectation and achievement. Within this social relationship the latent risk of stigmatization is accepted or not actively averted, but the students are left in an ambivalent and rather awkward position (Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009; Sharma & Salend, 2016;). Hence, the results show an implicit functional view of the use of school assistants for 'remedial education' (Blatchford et al., 2009), with the goal of orienting and normalizing students to prevailing educational framework conditions.

At the same time, the study's results expose the tension between emancipation and the need for support as a fundamental ambivalence (e.g. between autonomy and control) regarding paraprofessional support (Lortie, 1969). The results are compatible with the international discourse about teaching assistance, which has repeatedly pointed out the need for (systemic and personal) assistance in the context of inclusion but also discusses the resulting (possibly stigmatizing) dependent relationship (Chambers, 2015; Sharma & Salend, 2016) and the reduction in the student's performance development, as can be seen, for example, in pull-out situations (Blatchford, Russel, & Webster, 2012). Therefore, as Chambers (2015) points out, it is "not enough to simply increase the number of adults in

the classroom" (p. 14), but to coordinate support in relation to roles and responsibilities within a comprehensive whole-school approach (Slee & Weiner, 2011). Up to now, positions and responsibilities within multi-professional teams in inclusive schools remain largely unclear, and there seems to be a gap between (para-)professional assistants' formal roles and their actual instructional behavior (Egilson & Traustadottir, 2009). Furthermore, culture-comparative perspectives on Canada, Germany and England show that within the formal paraprofessional role the practice of teaching assistants is characterized by a strong struggle for autonomy in a field shaped by heteronomous structures (Fritzsche & Köpfer, 2019).

In summary, difference-based research seems relevant for the analysis of in-class and in-school situations with teaching assistants from the perspective of children and adolescents, as it adds an additional relevant perspective to the predominantly adult-focused research in the field of inclusion-oriented school research and takes into account the special importance of children and adolescents in the generation of social practices. Further research should also capture the perspective of students without experience with school assistants and the influence of contextual conditions (e.g. school type, classroom, support focus, etc.).

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