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The relevance of qualitative research approaches in inclusive education

Zusammenfassung

Der Text untersucht die Rolle qualitativer Forschung in der inklusiven Bildung und hinterfragt die Dominanz evidenzbasierter Ansätze in der Bildungspolitik. Die Autorinnen argumentieren, dass eine ausschließliche Fokussierung auf quantitative Forschungsergebnisse die Komplexität inklusiver Bildungsprozesse und die Perspektiven benachteiligter Gruppen unzureichend abbildet. Sie heben die Stärken ethnografischer und qualitativer Forschungsansätze hervor, die ein tieferes Verständnis für die Dynamiken in inklusiven Schulen und den damit verbundenen Reformen ermöglichen. Qualitative Forschung bietet durch ihre Praxisnähe und ihren Fokus auf soziale Dynamiken wertvolle Einsichten, die in der evidenzbasierten Forschung oft übersehen werden. Abschließend plädieren die Autorinnen für eine ausgewogenere Integration beider Forschungsansätze in der Bildungspolitik, um eine Grundlage für gerechtere Bildungsentscheidungen zu erhalten.

Abstract

The text examines the role of qualitative research in inclusive education and questions the dominance of evidence-based approaches in education policy. The authors argue that an exclusive focus on quantitative research findings inadequately represents the complexity of inclusive educational processes and the perspectives of disadvantaged groups. They highlight the strengths of ethnographic and qualitative research approaches, which allow for a deeper understanding of the dynamics in inclusive schools and the associated reforms. Qualitative research provides valuable insights through its practical relevance and focus on social dynamics, which are often overlooked in evidence-based research. In conclusion, the authors advocate for a more balanced integration of both research approaches in education policy to make more comprehensive and equitable educational decisions.

Advance Organizer

Zielsetzung und Überblick:

Der Text von Jessica Löser und Kerstin Rabenstein behandelt die Bedeutung qualitativer Forschungsansätze im Kontext der inklusiven Bildung. Die Autorinnen kritisieren die vorherrschende Fokussierung auf evidenzbasierte Forschung, die oft quantitative Methoden bevorzugt, und plädieren dafür, auch qualitative Forschung stärker in politische Entscheidungen und Schulentwicklungsprozesse einzubeziehen. Ziel ist es, die Komplexität inklusiver Bildungsprozesse besser zu erfassen und über eine ausgewogenere Berücksichtigung beider Forschungsansätze differenziertere Erkenntnisse zu gewinnen.

Schlüsselthemen und Konzepte:

1. Kritik an evidenzbasierter Forschung
 - a) Die Autorinnen argumentieren, dass die ausschließliche Fokussierung auf evidenzbasierte, quantitative Forschung wichtige Aspekte inklusiver Bildung übersehen kann. Insbesondere werden dadurch die vielfältigen und komplexen Formen der Exklusion, die bestimmte Schülergruppen betreffen, nicht ausreichend berücksichtigt.
2. Bedeutung qualitativer Forschung
 - a) Qualitative Ansätze, insbesondere ethnografische Forschung, bieten die Möglichkeit, die sozialen und pädagogischen Praktiken in inklusiven Schulen differenziert zu analysieren. Diese Ansätze erlauben es, die Dynamiken und Ambivalenzen in Bildungsprozessen zu verstehen, die durch reine quantitative Methoden oft nicht erfasst werden.
3. Einschränkungen von Generalisierungen
 - a) Die Autorinnen heben hervor, dass Generalisierungen, die aus evidenzbasierter Forschung abgeleitet werden, nicht immer für alle inklusiven Bildungskontexte anwendbar sind.
4. Langfristige Auswirkungen und Machtverhältnisse
 - a) Ethnografische Studien können auch langfristige Konsequenzen von Reformen und die Rolle von Machtverhältnissen in pädagogischen Kontexten untersuchen. Diese Perspektiven sind wichtig, um die Stabilität und die Veränderungen in inklusiven Bildungssystemen zu verstehen.

Verbindung zu Vorwissen und Kontext

Dieser Text baut auf bestehenden Diskussionen zur Inklusion und zur Rolle der Forschung in der Bildungspolitik auf. Leser und Leserinnen, die mit der Debatte um evidenzbasierte Praxis vertraut sind, werden hier eine Erweiterung der

Perspektive finden, die die Stärken qualitativer Methoden in den Vordergrund stellt. Der Text ermutigt dazu, das bisherige Verständnis von Forschung in der inklusiven Bildung zu hinterfragen und die Vielfalt der Methoden zu schätzen. Dies ist besonders relevant für Pädagogen und Pädagoginnen, Personen aus der Bildungspolitik und Forschende, die sich mit den Herausforderungen der inklusiven Schulentwicklung auseinandersetzen.

Critique of evidence-based research

There is a tendency in many countries to use a narrow understanding of evidence-based research and practice when it comes to (inclusive) education and policy decisions (Boyle et al., 2020; Nilvius & Svensson, 2022; Proske & Rabenstein, 2018; Forster, 2014; Waitoller et al., 2022). This has been discussed controversially. Knigge (in this volume) highlights the commonalities of different research approaches. We agree with him that school research today consists of different research agendas and methods – often referred to as quantitative and qualitative – that have much in common and can synergize with each other. Also, we agree with his wider understanding of evidence-based research. However, rather than showing the potential of adding research perspectives, we would like to highlight the differences and – maybe – contradictions between different research agendas and methods, due to a strong focus on quantitative results in the educational debate. This way we offer arguments for including more qualitative research in policy decisions to highlight the potential of a qualitative approach in the context of inclusive education. Doing so, it is not our goal – similar to Waitoller et al. (2022) – to “pit quantitative and qualitative studies against each other or to argue that qualitative studies have no role in policy making” (ibid., p. 3), rather to raise the awareness of the value of different research perspectives in the context of inclusive education. By demonstrating the advantages of a qualitative (ethnographic) research approach, we also try to point out the disadvantages when policy makers only focus on quantitative results.

Therefore, we would like to consider the potential for controversy within research fields, which is not only characteristic of scientific research, but could also be helpful for school development in the long run. Controversies in the social sciences could be used to raise people’s awareness of the complexity of transformation processes, of the different perspectives of the various groups and stakeholders involved, and therefore of the need of a reflexive attitude towards research findings in general. This is why we feel that it is important to offer an additional perspective in the following sketch, apart from Knigge’s approach.

First, we will outline some critiques of evidence-based research in inclusive education. Second, we will try to identify strengths of qualitative (ethnographic) research in (inclusive) education. This will be followed by a conclusion. All in all, due to

lack of space, this article can only be a kind of commentary on epistemological discussions that play an important role for better understanding different research agendas.

Questioning evidence-based research in inclusive education

While inclusive education research used to be a “catch-all phrase for many different kinds of enquiry”, as Alan and Slee (2008, p. 1) pointed out more than 15 years ago, there seems to be a movement towards evidence-based research and practice in many countries in the context of the theoretical and political debate about inclusive education (see Biesta, 2011; Boyle et al., 2020; Denton, 2012; See et al., 2015; Nilvius & Svensson, 2022). Even though more and more researchers from all kinds of disciplines are getting involved in issues of inclusive schools and school systems, there seems to be a tendency towards evidence-based research – rather than valuing different kinds of research agendas and methods. The strong development towards evidence-based research and practice has been criticized by numerous authors worldwide (see e.g. Artiles et al., 2010; Boyle et al., 2020; Tomkins & Bristow, 2023). We would like to point out a few critiques that take into account some special features of the research field of ‘inclusion’.

Why highlight only one interpretation of the world?

One major reason for the strong development towards evidence-based research is “the prevalence of ‘psychoeducational’ models of thinking about diagnostic categories” as identified by Mintz and Norwich (2023) (*ibid.*, p. 1). While this is mainly directed at the field of ‘special education’, as they emphasize, it is also to be found in other fields of education. However, examining pedagogical practices only through the lens of ‘psychoeducational’ models of thought means considering only one possible interpretation of the world. In general, social research should not be confined to a nomothetic method. In other words, social research is not only about evidence but also about different interpretations of the world.

For example, categorizing students and teachers by means of psychological models plays an important role. Since every possible interpretation has blind spots, there should be a reflexive turn to point out these blind spots. Mintz and Norwich (2023), for example, focus on the categorization debate, emphasizing the importance of continually questioning what we do not yet know:

“[...] tensions between differing conceptualizations of difference and the role of categorization present questions as yet not fully answered as to the ways in which evidence can and should articulate with practice in this specific domain. Such debates specifically about inclusion and special education intercalate, of course, with wider debates about the place of evidence in education” (Mintz & Norwich, 2023, p. 1).

Following this approach would mean to identify and reflect upon the traditional categorizations of students in the context of educational practice – and also research. One answer could be to offer a broader research focus in addition to the rather narrow and more traditional focus on categories of special educational needs. By doing so, one questions the idea of diagnostic categories as objective knowledge, as it is traditionally found in the field of special and inclusive education and offers more interpretations ‘of the world’.

Why not take into account the perspectives of disadvantaged students and families and intersecting forms of exclusion?

As internationally emphasized by a variety of authors, evidence-based research *alone* does not seem to sufficiently cover the diverse field of inclusive education: “[...] quantitative approaches to research alone are not enough to eliminate complex forms of educational exclusion and move toward a more inclusive public education” (Waitoller et al., 2022, p. 7). Similarly, Boyle et al. (2020) emphasize: “Inclusion is not incompatible with an evidence-based discourse, however a more nuanced understanding of what counts as ‘evidence’ in education is needed, as well as a clearer definition of inclusive education” (ibid., p. 13). By only relying on evidence-based research, the process of policy decision runs the risk of not taking into account the complexity of inclusive and exclusive processes, as pointed out to by Waitoller et al. (2022), for example the consequences “for those students and families who experience intersecting forms of exclusion based on disability and other forms of social difference (e.g., race, ethnicity, class)” (ibid., p. 3). Minority groups in particular run the risk of being discriminated against if changes in education policy are mainly based on quantitative research results – and thus on a so-called average – for example only on the academic performance of students (ibid.).

Based on the city of Chicago, Waitoller et al. (2022) outline how a one-sided approach towards evidence-based research can lead to disadvantages especially for marginalized families, even though the intention of the political changes made were supposed to bring improvement for all students. Using the example of school closings in the U.S., they sketch how the decisions to improve the situation for all students were made and show that they were mainly based on data about “poor performance or limited school enrolment” (ibid., p. 4). By doing so, they see the risk of “universalizing a particular truth about the school and its community and constructing a policy decision as inevitable” (ibid.). Waitoller et al. (2022) show the advantages of ethnographic views that provide insight into the perspective of the community to offer “more nuanced understandings” (ibid., p. 4). They emphasize the advantages of including the perspective of the community members in terms of the rootedness and meaningfulness of the school within

the neighborhood: „schools acted as glue for Black communities“ (ibid.). Based on this argumentation, the community does not benefit from closing down the school.

Waitoller et al. (2022) argue, that incorporating “the histories of urban geographies, intersecting forms of injustice, and the voices of students and families” (ibid., p. 8), into research “will increase the likelihood of more just and inclusive policies in education” (ibid.). Other authors also share this view (see e.g. Artiles et al., 2010). Consequently, based on the assumption that a narrow approach runs the risk to overlook “the nuances of inclusive education” (Boyle et al., 2020, p. 2), research should offer a broader view within the research practices.

Why not be interested in diverse individual cases instead of generalizations of the outcomes drawn from evidence-based research for inclusive settings?

In the context of a strong sensitivity to human differences it is questioned, whether the generalizations drawn from evidence-based research are suitable for all inclusive educational settings. For example, Boyle et al. (2020) criticize this procedure by emphasizing “that it is not practically possible to measure interventions in inclusive education so that they are generalizable across the many students who need support, because the interventions must be specific to individual need and therefore are not generalizable, nor are they intended to be” (ibid., p. 2). Part of their reasoning is that there is no “definitive understanding” (ibid., p. 3) of inclusive education, so that “it is almost impossible to measure and therefore provide evidence of its effectiveness” (ibid.). Furthermore, different research often focuses on different groups under the label of ‘inclusive education’ (ibid., see also Florian, 2014). However, by not identifying the group addressed by inclusive education, the question is raised “*who* evidence should be collected from when attempting to measure the success (or not) of inclusive education” (Boyle et al., 2020, p. 3), especially when understanding inclusive education as a concept for diverse student groups. That this can be a challenge within evidence-based research is demonstrated by the fact that some evaluated groups of students are not big enough to provide sufficient data for new insights as described by Lenkeit et al. (2023, p. 26), for example.

From this perspective, the focus of evidence-based research on averages does not seem to meet the diverse concept of a group in inclusive educational settings. An understanding of inclusive education as being more diverse consequently shifts the focus to diverse individual cases, especially when aiming to capture connections and the contingency of educational processes.

Why not discuss unexpected effects of daily routines in schools referring to evidence-based practices?

Similar criticism of evidence-based research can also be found within evidence-based practice. It seems to be fruitful to differentiate “between the rhetoric and reality of evidence-based practice” (Tomkins & Bristow 2023, p. 118) as it has been shown by an action research project in the field of care ethics. Tomkins & Bristow (2023) suggest to “integrate ‘what matters’ with ‘what works’, and ‘what matters/works *here*’ with ‘what matters/works everywhere’” (ibid., p. 118).

Internationally widely known as an example of evidence-based practice at schools is the model Response to Intervention (RTI) of the U.S. (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). This model has found its way into some schools in other countries, e.g. in the United Kingdom, Germany, and is widely discussed in many countries (see e.g. Denton, 2012; See et al., 2015; Nilvius & Svensson, 2022; Voß et al., 2014). However, the model has faced significant criticism, for example from the perspective of social justice (Artiles et al., 2010) and the perspective of inclusive education, both point out that RTI incorporates different exclusion processes (for the German context see e.g. Hinz, 2013; Müller & Pfrang, 2021). Hinz (2013) questions the RTI model as not being inclusive, also because it only identifies one group of students (with the risk of stigmatizing) instead of opening the lessons to include the diversity of students (ibid., no page given).

Also, Artiles et al. (2010) claim from an North American perspective: “Consistent with traditional approaches to social justice in special education, RTI is caught in the equity–difference dilemma as it aims to give the same treatment (i.e., rigorous instruction) to all groups as a way to deliver justice, while it strives to recognize differences [...]” (ibid., p. 252). Their detailed analysis of RTI reveals through the lens of social justice, why students from minority groups do not benefit from this model as much as hoped. Even more so, they outline why RTI risks overlooking “the institutional and social structures that permeate everyday experiences of these students” (ibid., p. 255). Additionally, they point out that “RTI is based on a field of analysis narrowed to considerations of ability, stripped of cultural and linguistic resources and mediating forces” (ibid., p. 255).

To summarize, even though RTI claims “to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student’s responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities” (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010, p. 2), RTI can be presented as an example where the desired aim of a programmatic approach (to implement specific changes at school and practice in the context of lessons) and the outcome can differ strongly (Artiles et al., 2010; Hinz, 2013; Löser & Rabenstein in this volume). Consequently, the analysis above raises the question

whether RTI, as an evidence-based practice approach, offers any inclusive perspective that provides a broad understanding of inclusion and takes into consideration the interdependences between continuing orders of difference and discrimination in and outside lessons (Artiles et al., 2010; Hinz, 2013).

Highlighting the strength of qualitative (ethnographic) research in (inclusive) education

Qualitative research is a term for a broad variety of different research approaches that we cannot consider here in their entirety. What we would like to emphasize in the following is the potential of ethnographic, practice-theoretical grounded research (Rouse, 2007) and its role in enhancing our understanding of inclusive school development and inclusive teaching. By way of a few examples, we would like to demonstrate why, in this context, ethnographic research is not – and cannot – seek to produce nomothetic knowledge. Instead, its focus on social (educational) practice as permanent becoming and having become allows it to contribute relevant aspects to the understanding of educational practices at inclusive schools and of inclusive teaching.

A key point to consider is that many ethnographic studies are not seamlessly linked to the educational policy or pedagogical goals of inclusive education and inclusive schools. Although this would be possible for research in other paradigms, it is currently more likely to be found in qualitative or ethnographic research in the context of inclusion research. From a normative perspective, inclusion can certainly be seen as a development towards equal participation of all children and youths in the educational system. At the same time, however, it is pointed out that pedagogical normativity, and thus concepts of inclusive schools and inclusive teaching as well, are – and ultimately must be – constantly contested in the (post)modern era (Gottuck et al., 2021). As a result, many ethnographic studies assume that the reform of ‘inclusion’ in the educational system is controversial and – in poststructuralist terms – contested and will, or must, remain so. Moreover, currently, individuals, principals, teachers, students, and parents are made responsible for inclusive transitions, without sufficiently taking into account the conditions (Wrana, 2019). Against this background, we would like to outline five strong points of the research interests, questions and orientations of qualitative or ethnographic research.

First, qualitative or ethnographic research fundamentally acknowledges the gap between program and practice. For example, in terms of discourse ethnography, pedagogical programs can be studied as powerful discursive practices that suggest an orientation of pedagogical actors towards certain pedagogical norms, rules, procedures, means and approaches and charge them with pedagogical meaning.

Pedagogical programs are usually accompanied by promises that certain pedagogical challenges can be solved. However, this is often insufficient; simple solutions, or at least easy-to-use tools with immediate effects, are usually promised. Besides, this ignores structural problems that – regardless of the quality of the tools used – cannot be solved, but only dealt with in varying degrees of satisfaction.

Second, ethnographic research based on practice theory fundamentally assumes that social practice is unstable (Rouse, 2007). Conversely, this implies that even once practices have changed, they must be continuously stabilized through their constant repetition and confirmation. Insofar as repetitions can never be identical, the question of their stabilization continually arises, even if certain practices of inclusive teaching and inclusive schools are successfully implemented. Therefore, inclusive school and teaching reforms can only be understood as ongoing processes, as permanently working on their implementation.

Third, in light of this background, it becomes clear that ethnographic or practice-theoretical research cannot find any clear effects of a reform. Unambiguity with regard to effects and impacts could only be produced under the condition of a stagnant social practice. Strictly speaking, there can be no unambiguity in the sense of reliable predictions in evidence-based research, which operates based on probabilities – and not causalities. However, in view of the (in-)stability and thus the social dynamics of school and teaching as social events, ethnographic and practice-theoretical research is primarily interested in the ambivalences of pedagogical practices, i.e. the ambiguous effects of reforms that cannot be assigned to either side of success and failure.

Fourthly, power relations in pedagogical settings are of great interest for ethnographic or subjectivation theory research, as they can contribute to the (de)stabilization of established practices. Here, power is not understood as a stable entity an individual is provided with or not, but as a relation. Instead, the concept of subjectivation, in the sense of becoming a subject, emphasizes the importance of social norms and thus the dependence of the human subject (Rose & Ricken 2018). As a result, empirical research focuses on practices and relations rather than on individuals and their intentions, motives, beliefs, and so on.

Finally, we would like to point out that an interest in recognizing medium- and long-term consequences is compatible with ethnographic research, since its field-sensitive methodological tools for gaining knowledge are highly suitable for researching the frictions, ruptures, and unfulfilled promises of reforms, but also the losses and thus what might be worth preserving from aging for the new (Löser and Rabenstein in this volume). Thus, research into the consequences of reforms would, on the one hand, ask about the uncertain effects of reforms from the perspective of an uncertain future. However, looking at possible futures may not be sufficient. Therefore, on the other hand, further qualitative research approaches could be developed “in the sense of working on inclusive education as a ‘concrete

utopia' (Bloch 1985; transl. FW & AK)" (Weitkämper & Köpfer, 2024, p. 8). To sum up: Only "drawing on concepts and approaches that have been evaluated can inadvertently render the future smaller and less possible, rather than expanding future possibilities" (Bock et al., 2024, p. 5), instead we could consider exploring studying teachers', parents' and students' "hopes as traces into futures" (ibid., 2024, p. 6).

Conclusions

We agree with Knigge (in this volume) that educational research nowadays is based on different research agendas and methods, which can benefit from each other. While he highlighted the commonalities of these research approaches, our focus has been on emphasizing the differences by focusing on the strong points of qualitative research and strengthening the argument to include these when making policy and school development decisions. While we aimed to raise awareness of the advantages for a broader research perspective in the decision-making process of educational policies, we understand the challenges involved in doing so. "Nevertheless, a core struggle of inclusive education efforts has been translating theory and research to practice and policy implementation" (Waitoller et al., 2022, p. 2). By using a broader perspective as described above, which strongly includes results of qualitative studies, it would be possible to include the outlined poles of contingency and uncertainty and ambiguity in the context of decisions about school development and educational policies. As has been outlined, such an approach would allow for more students to profit from those changes, which is one major goal of inclusive education.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies plus a professional translator in the writing process

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