Involving Young People with Disabilities in Post-school Transitions through Reflecting Teams. Methodological Reflections and Adaptations for More Participation in a Longitudinal Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses a participatory method to involve young people with disabilities in research by using reflecting teams. In the course of the longitudinal project "Cooperation for Inclusion in Educational Transitions" on the transition from school to work of young people with disabilities, we examined ways to increase the participation of these people in the design and content of reflecting team sessions. In this regard, the reflecting team, more often used in a counseling context, was adapted to provide a special form of group discussion for participatory research with young people with different disabilities. The paper describes and discusses the adaptations that were made in the reflecting team research process. These adaptations included giving these young people, rather than a researcher, a role as moderator, inviting increased visualization within the reflecting process, and using an outsider-witness approach. Finally, we discuss the potential of the reflecting team for our participatory research with young people with disabilities.

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INTRODUCTION

The post-school transition of young people with disabilities, meaning the transition from compulsory school to further education or employment, is still a major challenge for inclusive measures in the Austrian transition system (Fasching, 2014; Husny & Fasching, 2020). Educational transitions generally act as intersections that facilitate discrimination in terms of risks and opportunities for those who undergo them (Kutscha, 1991, p. 128). Existing social inequalities (e.g. education, disability gender, social and cultural background) have an increasing impact during these transitions, and additional processes of inclusion and exclusion come into play to further promote the process of social selection. In particular, young people with disabilities find that their transition from compulsory school to continuing education, vocational training and employment bears a number of risks and uncertainties (Atkins, 2016). They find their transition particularly difficult, taking detours, making wrong choices, and sometimes facing failure.

In Austria, the involvement of children and young people in the transition planning process from compulsory school to further education or employment has generally been limited. Instead, teachers and parents tend to be the protagonists, not only in the process of vocational transition but also in participatory research into education (Wöhrer et al., 2017, p. 34). There is a need for research into inclusive educational transitions, and more specifically the transitions of young people with disabilities. Such research should place the voice of the target group at the center of attention (Aston et al., 2010; Pallisera et al,. 2016) as it is the members of this group for whom the measures of inclusive transitional support are being devised. In addition few participatory studies have been conducted on the vocational transition of young people, especially those with disabilities (Fasching & Felbermayr, 2022; Pallisera et al., 2016; Tarleton et al., 2005). Burke (2010) states that the likelihood of children and young people with disabilities participating in a research process is much lower than that of children and young people without disabilities. However, if they do participate in research and if their voices are heard, they are willing to actively share and reflect on their experiences with education (Pallisera et al., 2016; Tarleton et al., 2005). Furthermore, the participation of children and young people in research can have positive effects on their motivation, learning and acquisition of competencies and experiences (Rudduck et al., 2004; Wöhrer et al., 2017). They should also be considered as experts, which is only possible if communication with them is conducted on the basis of equality (i.e. if democratic processes are granted (Fasching, 2020; Fasching & Felbermayr, 2019)). There are therefore a number of reasons to encourage the active participation of young people with disabilities and their parents in the individual transition planning (ITP) process. Similarly, it makes sense to find ways to include young people as active participants in any research about transition. Such aims require appropriate participative methodology and implementation methods to be devised.

This paper starts with a short overview of the research context, which includes the theoretical framing and the research design of the project. We then continue with a discussion of participatory research methodology and show how and why we use the reflecting team as a special form of group discussion for our participatory research with young people with different disabilities. Next, we describe the process of reflecting on team sessions with young people with disabilities. We then reflect on the method of the reflecting team for participatory cooperation and describe the adaptations which were made (young people as moderators, increased visualization, and using the outsider-witness approach). Finally, we discuss the potential of the reflecting team for our participatory research with young people with disabilities for participative cooperation.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

THEORETICAL FRAMING IN EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS RESEARCH

Research on educational transitions in the context of inclusion primarily focuses on forms of structural discrimination of people with disabilities. In this way, (re-)produced deficit orientations and normalization tendencies in educational transitions can be broken down. However, transitions are not solely influenced by structural mechanisms of advantage or disadvantage as well as individual-based characteristics and the way of acting. They are also particularly influenced by the interplay of different lifestyles and socialization contexts. This

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makes systemic approaches to transitions highly relevant. Individual experiences and coping actions in transition processes are never detached from the respective interactional, institutional and societal contextual conditions, which must also be considered (Fasching, 2020). From a systemic perspective, transitions are produced and shaped co-constructively. They are never only accompanied by changes in the lifeworld of the transitioner but are also dynamically influenced by areas and environments in which the transitioner participates. In this sense, all the actors are involved in some way in the cooperation and thus in the co-construction of the transition (process). Through a systemic approach, the perspective is directed to the context of action, in and through which individual biographical actions take place. In this way, resources for participation in transition processes of young people with disabilities can be opened up and barriers overcome. When talking about disability we refer to an understanding of disability as a social construct. This systemic approach to disability means that we consider barriers in different social contexts, which also implies an interaction between the disability (at individual level) and society's response to it (Braun, 2004; Fasching, 2020). These theoretical considerations have acted as guidelines in our research project on the experiences of cooperation of young people with disabilities and their families.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND THE QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH DESIGN

Our considerations are based on the design and implementation of the multi-annual research project titled "Cooperation for Inclusion in Educational Transitions." The project received funding from the Austrian Science Fund and over a five-year period (2016–2021) investigated the experiences of participative cooperation of young people with disabilities and their parents (with/without disability) with professionals in the transition from compulsory school to further education, vocational training or employment. This research project explores and reconstructs, under aspects of diversity, the experiences of cooperation between professionals (teachers, vocational counselors, support givers), young people with disabilities, and their parents during the transition process. It thus furthers theory building in the field of participative cooperation and participatory research through reflecting teams, and also promotes the adoption of political measures for the inclusion of young people with disabilities in education. Participative cooperation for us means the involvement and participation of all those who form part of the transition (young people with disabilities, parents, professionals), not only in practice (involvement in transition counselling processes) but also in the related research (for more information on key findings of the project see for example: Fasching & Felbermayr, 2022; Husny & Fasching, 2020; Tanzer & Fasching, 2022).

The focus of the five-year longitudinal study is on qualitative research methods as applied in a so-called research circle, which was conducted in this case three times (in the years 2017, 2019 and 2020). Figure 1 shows how two qualitative methods were used and triangulated in each research circle: intensive interviewing (Charmaz, 2014) and reflecting teams (Andersen,

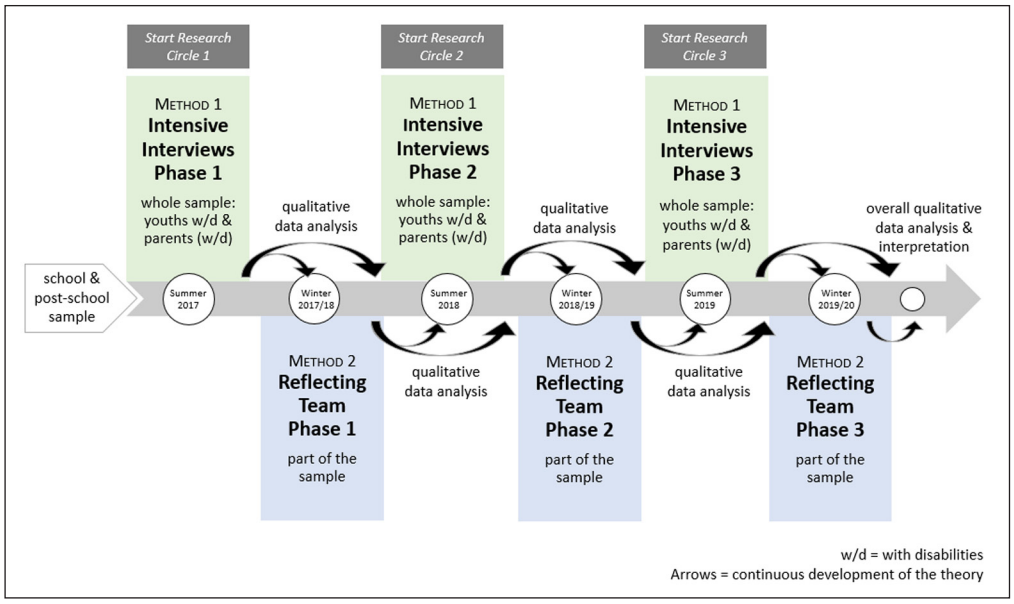

Figure 1 Research circles in a qualitative longitudinal study design.

2011). Each research circle began with individual *intensive interviewing* of the young people with disabilities and their parents. The time spans between the surveying phases remained unchanged throughout the duration of the study. The interviews were conducted in the summers of three consecutive years and the *reflecting teams* met in the winters which followed. The arrows in Figure 1 show that theoretical hypotheses that arose from the intensive interviews were validated by the reflecting teams. In the application of the reflecting team method (Andersen, 2011), the participants are involved in analysis and interpretation in their role as co-researchers in reflecting working groups (Lewis et al., 2008).[1]

The research project follows the constructivist grounded theory methodology of Charmaz (2014), with data collection, data analysis, and theory building. In line with this methodology, the theory evolves from the actual data and is thus "grounded" in the data. Charmaz (2014) also explains that researchers do not enter the research field or start an analysis in the form of a so-called tabula rasa. This is why great importance is given to permanent reflection – especially in the constructivist variant of grounded theory. In the article at hand, this process is visible in how we develop initial theoretical hypotheses from the data and discuss them with references to the literature.

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH THE GROUP METHOD OF REFLECTING TEAMS

PARTICIPATORY METHODOLOGY

It is by no means a new trend to use participatory research methods with the aim of increasing participation. In the English-speaking research community, participatory research methods have been used since the mid-1980s to take the perspective of people with disabilities and their families into account. Nowadays, the concept of "inclusive" or "participatory research" refers to a number of approaches that include people with disabilities as co-researchers in academic knowledge production. Therefore, participatory research in inclusive contexts can be understood as an umbrella term for a research approach that explores social reality in partnership with the different actors within this reality (Abma et al., 2019; Bigby et al., 2014; Cavet, et al., 2004; Gilbert, 2004; Walmsley et al., 2003). One fundamental aim of participatory research is to facilitate more participation of the general public through their participation in research (von Unger, 2014, p. 1). In this way, participatory research not only contributes to integration but also makes the claim to change social and political reality. Not only does participatory research make the important claim of empowerment and emancipation, it is also strongly affected by the power dynamics and asymmetrical relationships among the groups that are involved. Claims of power may be inherent to different roles in the research process and need to be reflected continuously. Consequently, it is essential to consider ethical research aspects, especially in the context of participatory research with vulnerable target groups (Fasching & Felbermayr, 2019; Wiles et al., 2005). Participatory research has the potential to give rise to "new forms of knowledge in the process of cooperative generation of knowledge" (von Unger, 2014, p. 7). Those conducting participatory research can thus claim, first, to conduct a comprehensive kind of analysis of social realities and, second, to shape these realities by actively bringing about change through criticism of ideology and authority – all within the practice of cooperative research.

How exactly participatory research takes place depends to a large extent on the research object, the interest in knowledge gain, and the specific methodological design. Successful participatory research has been conducted with young people with disabilities employing focus groups (e.g. Aston et al., 2010; Barr et al., 2003; Conney, 2002; Pallisera et al., 2016). Results obtained by these researchers have shown that a *group setting* is especially suitable for participatory research with persons with disabilities because the exchange that takes place within the peer group may make it easier for the participants to open up and share personal opinions than the classical interview setting. However, young people can also be inhibited in

1 Different projects use terms like "reference group" or "advisory committee" in different ways for their participatory research with youths with disabilities. "`Reference group`: disabled people who fed directly into the research process, impacting on research decisions". `Advisory committee`: a wider group, including disabled people alongside other stakeholders, with whom emerging ideas were shared" (Lewis et al. 2008, 79).

front of peers. Aston and Lambert (2010, p. 43) recommend that, in participatory research with young people, the moderator should allow the young people to determine for themselves the specific topics that are significant for them in the discussion about their vocational transitions.

While these aspects of participatory research (especially in group settings) are relevant for our study, we have conceptualized our own participatory research to special group settings of reflecting teams – a method which we describe in the following subsection.

REFLECTING TEAMS METHOD

For our participatory research, we chose the method of reflecting teams. Reflecting teams can be conceived as group discussions which are based on systemic thinking (Andersen, 1987, 2011) and are frequently used in diverse counseling contexts, particularly family therapy. The Norwegian psychologist and sociologist Tom Andersen developed the concept of reflecting teams in the context of his systemic family therapy in the 1980s. In traditional therapy, a team of therapists discuss their subjective observations of the individuals and exchange their thoughts and observations after the sessions. Andersen, however, considered it important for the client to have access to these reflections. He was convinced that the client would be able to benefit from the conversations between the therapists. This idea also convinced his team and the family with whom he was working. After a number of trials involving the family in the therapy process, a potential improvement was detected in the combination of cooperation and reflection (Andersen, 1987; see also Fasching, 2020). Andersen was always very critical of the traditional therapy system. He found that, due to the power conferred to the therapists, there was little possibility of cooperation and that it was difficult for therapists to influence their clients. This perceived shortcoming led him to develop a democratic working method using reflecting teams (Andersen, 2011), an approach which proved to be very successful and is nowadays applied in diverse counseling and coaching contexts, clinical psychology, and systemic family therapy.

In contrast to classical forms of group discussion, the distinguishing features of reflecting teams include their working together in a team, subsequent reflecting sessions, and "reflection on reflection" (see Figure 2). Reflecting teams aim to make the relationship between counselor and client more symmetrical and to foster an openness to change. Furthermore, ideas are generated not "for" but "together with" the target group (Andersen, 2011). They can thus be used for the investigation of cooperation both in terms of content and method. Von Unger uses the term "cooperative generation of knowledge" (von Unger, 2014, p. 7).

While the popularity of the reflecting team has increased, its application in research is still scarce (Hawley, 2006; Pender et al., 2014), especially for the target group of persons with disabilities (Kaur et al., 2009). One exception is Anslow (2013), who employed the method in relation to the target group of "adults with learning disabilities". One key finding of her study was that adaptations to the respective target group, such as visualizations, larger font sizes, simple language and the use of metaphors, are necessary when working with the reflecting team method. The risk of imposing excessive cognitive demands on persons with intellectual disabilities can be reduced by making adaptations to the needs of each target group. We find that the democratic approach of the reflecting team (Andersen, 2011) is highly compatible with the demand for participation in (inclusive) research (von Unger, 2014). Both reflecting teams and participatory approaches aim to actively involve all those persons who are part of the process, giving them a stronger voice and an active role. This is the reason why reflecting teams were chosen in our project as the method for participatory research. Below, we briefly explain the research context and then describe in more detail the reflecting teams and their implementation in the project.

USING REFLECTING TEAMS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

We worked with reflecting teams for three main reasons: a) it enabled discussion of the initial hypotheses that arose from the analysis of the interview with the participants in the reflecting teams; b) it allowed for continuous theory generation on participative cooperation; and c) it served as a participatory approach for our collaborative research, which also had a transdisciplinary character.

Constitution

The sample consisted of 18 cases. Each "case" involved the young person and either one or both parents. Geographically, all the cases were from Vienna. From the whole sample four young people with disabilities and four parents (with or without disability) agreed to participate in the reflecting teams. In total, three reflecting teams were formed with three groups (young people, parents, and professionals). In this contribution, however, we will only be reporting on the reflecting team with the young people, which was formed in the preparatory phase in 2017 and consisted of one young woman and three young men with different diagnosed disabilities (one with learning disabilities, one with learning and physical disabilities, and two with visual disabilities) and aged between 16 and 19.

This group remained constant over the whole period of the longitudinal study, with the meetings held three times in intervals of approximately one year. As co-researchers, the young people received appropriate financial compensation for each participation in a reflecting team session. Qualitative social research, especially participatory research, requires careful consideration of *research ethics* during the whole research process. In an information session, the research participants were informed about the objectives of the collaboration, the "roles" of the persons involved (tasks and responsibilities of the members in the reflecting team), the planned methods (participant observation and video recording), the expected time duration, data usage and related authorization, data storage, confidentiality, and anonymization, as well as the voluntary nature of participation in the project, linked with the right to revocation without disadvantage (Fasching & Felbermayr, 2019). The preliminary talks were an integral part of the project design and a prerequisite for making an *informed decision* to participate. Informed consent had to be signed by all the participants prior to each survey phase. After obtaining the consent of all participants, the reflecting teams were audio and video recorded (except for break times). The young people had different types of disabilities and voiced different communicative needs to the group and the team. Greater accessibility was afforded in terms of space and materials (such as visualizations or larger font size) based on the specific needs of the individual participants. This method could also be used with young people with severe disabilities through individual-based adaptations. For reasons of research ethics, the participants were informed that they could abandon the project at any point without repercussions, and this was respected at all times (Thomson & Holland, 2003; Walford, 2005).

Structure

In contrast to intensive interviews, which take place in an individual setting, the reflecting team is a method that implements a group setting. The reflecting team – in the style of Andersen's model (1987, 2011) – differs from other group settings like focus groups in following a very similar three-part sequence structure (see Figure 2).

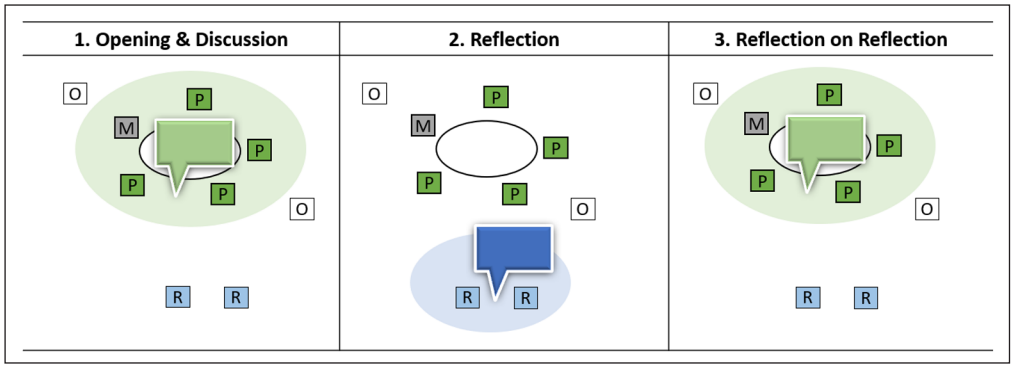

Figure 2 Reflecting team sessions (based on the theoretical assumptions of Andersen, 1987, 2011).

- In the first part, "Opening and Discussion", the moderator (M), one of the researchers, speaks with the participants (P). The discussion is observed by other researchers (R). With the participants' consent, Master's students can also be present during the discussion as observers (O).
- In the second part, "Reflection", the researchers (R) reflect together on their observation of the young people's discussion (R). The researchers report their reflections on what they have heard and seen back to the participants.

- In the third part, "Reflection on Reflection", the reflecting researchers return to their observer roles. The participants, the young people, have the opportunity to reflect on what they have heard. In this way, the young people have the last word in that they are able to express their agreement or disagreement (Andersen, 1987, 2011; Anslow, 2013; Fasching, 2020; Fredman, 2006).

Function

The aim of using this detailed process of reflecting was to give young people more opportunities to have an extended discussion about their views and perspectives. In other words, the aim was to find a process that enabled young people to participate in the research as more equal partners with the researchers. The three reflecting team sessions took place in a meeting room at the Department of Education. The research team chose this room because it had comfortable chairs and a sofa. As informed consent was ongoing, the young people and their parents (because their children were under the age of 18) had to fill in separate consent forms. Each reflecting team session with the young people lasted four hours in total and included several refreshment and comfort breaks. In order to ensure that the research ethics were respected, observation was interrupted during the breaks. Importantly, it was crucial to have a "safe space" in which everyone was able to feel comfortable and where all those involved treated each other with appreciation and respect. Only under such circumstances is it possible for participants to voice their thoughts, opinions and different perspectives. Participation in the reflecting team took place solely on a voluntary basis. Furthermore, careful and accessible language had to be used to allow and encourage as many options as possible and avoid negative attributions or criticism (Andersen, 1987, 2011).

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS AND ADAPTATIONS FOR MORE PARTICIPATION

Participatory research cannot rely on a pre-defined set of methods or on any one method. The research method to be followed should be continuously developed and adapted by the team in the course of the research process. If the research participants are to be involved in the research process, it is necessary to continue: a) reflecting on the method; and b) making adaptations to the method in the research process where necessary. To speak of participation means to conceive and consider equally the interests of both researchers and research participants. This means that data material is collected based on the guiding research question, and also that the research participants benefit from the process of speaking and reflecting together.

Adaptations were made to the method for sessions 2 and 3 in an effort to increase the participation of the young people. These were to invite the young people to act as moderators and increase visualization and to use the outsider-witness approach. Below, we explain the outsider-witness approach in greater detail (Russell et al., 2004; White, 2005). This approach turned out to make a significant difference, leading to more participation on the part of the youths during the reflection phase ("Reflection on Reflection") – the phase which characterizes the method of the reflecting team. As a self-critical observation, we must state that the changes to the method were made solely by the researchers. For greater participation, it would have been desirable to involve the young people with disabilities in this task. While this was not possible for reasons of timing and the organization of the longitudinal study, we made a great effort to actively involve them as much as possible.

YOUNG PEOPLE AS MODERATORS AND INCREASED VISUALIZATION

For participatory research with young people and groups, it is recommended that the role of the moderator be limited to leading the group discussion so that the young people can decide themselves which specific topics they consider relevant (Aston et al., 2010, p. 43). We wanted not only to involve the young people in determining the contents but also to offer them the role of moderator – provided there was interest on their part. Analysis of the first reflecting team session led to the conclusion that the young people were willing to ask each other questions, on occasions at a superficial level (e.g. questions regarding holiday plans) but also at a deeper level (e.g. request to explain disability).

To avoid excess pressure, they received a thorough introduction and careful preparation before assuming this role. Only one young person wanted to become a moderator, and he asked for support in his moderation. In this context, it must be clarified how the decision for, not against, a moderator was made. There is a risk of young people making a decision that will be approved of by society in order to avoid negative consequences. Harris (2003) looked closely at the decision making of people with disabilities and asked which conditions must be met for them to (be able to) make their own decisions and not have them made on their behalf. In all situations, whether it be during the reflecting team sessions or when signing the informed consent (see e.g. Lewis & Porter, 2004), the form in which information is presented (verbal, written etc.) must be adapted to the individual needs of the participants under the absence of pressure in order to allow the participants to make an informed decision. The reflecting team sessions revealed that timing must also be considered. The young people became familiar with the procedure of the reflection team session and with the roles of the individual persons during the first reflecting team session and came to the second one with certain expectations. To decide to use a moderator at the beginning of the second meeting was possibly too late and potentially surprising and overwhelming for the young people. Another possibility would have been to contact them beforehand and talk to them about moderation.

Even though we had already used *metaphors and visualizations* – adapted to individual needs – in the first reflecting team session, after receiving positive feedback we elaborated the metaphors and visualizations further and used them even more. In the first reflecting team session, the young people with disabilities were invited to name or write down terms they associate with the subject area "school/work" (Figure 3, left side) or "leisure time/hobbies" (Figure 3, right side). As the project was conducted in Vienna (Austria) the terms in the figure are in German. Although the visualization was at a very easy and simple level, it nevertheless animated the young people to talk about their experiences.

Figure 3 Visualization in reflecting team session 1.

In the second reflecting team session, a train metaphor (one engine and four wagons) was used to prepare the topic "Where do I lead the train ? / Does the train lead me to school, work and free time?"(see Figure 4). The adolescents decided for themselves who was wanted in each section of the train. They put themselves and their supporters in the engine they were driving. The wagons were contextualized as wagon 1 = school, 2 = work, 3 = leisure, while 4 remained open for a different topic.

In the third reflecting team session, the topic of participative cooperation was explored and validated by means of a "cooperation tree" (see Figure 5). The young people, as co-researchers, filled the branches with their definitions of cooperation by writing on individual "leaves" and attaching them to the tree. When discussing the topic "What is important to me in cooperation?" they wrote keywords on individual leaf cards and hung them on the tree. At the end, the researchers added keywords related to cooperation that had been gathered during the first reflecting team session and which were also discussed.

Figure 4 Train metaphor in reflecting team session 2.

Figure 5 Cooperation tree in reflecting team session 3.

Our positive experiences of using visualizations are in agreement with the findings of Anslow (2013) who states that visualizations used in reflecting teams with "adults with learning disabilities" have a positive effect. However, using images can also be a barrier for people such as blind youths, which is why the character of each individual target group must always be taken into consideration. Based on the interviews which were conducted prior to the reflecting team sessions, we were aware of the individual needs of the young people with visual impairments (e.g. larger font, contrasting colors). To be self-critical, we should state that we did not offer an alternative for young people with visual impairments. The relaxed atmosphere in the reflecting teams and the longitudinal character (repeated encounters and continuous bonding) also contributed to ensuring the active participation of all the young people with disabilities in the group. Nevertheless, we would recommend involving them in the development of individual reflecting team sessions.

ACKNOWLEDGING YOUNG PEOPLE USING AN OUTSIDER-WITNESS APPROACH

The second type of adaptation was made in the area of reflection. During the first reflecting team session, we realized that we the researchers had to adapt our reflections to the world of the young people to enable them to relate to these reflections. There is always a danger that when adults are asked to reflect on a conversation between young people, they say things that might not help in the goal of developing a more equal participative relationship. For example, advice can be given and praise for what has been said. When the reflecting team is used in family therapy, therapists often take an expert position in relation to those receiving therapy and give advice. Whilst there is a case for such types of response, both advice and praise place the person or persons giving these responses in the position of evaluator or judge of those receiving them. There is a danger that young people could experience such interactions as messages that they are not measuring up to what is expected of them but instead 'measuring down' in relation to societal norms. If this had occurred it would not have been helpful in our aim of creating a more participative and equal process between the researchers and the young people. However, there are different models of reflecting teams that can be used that acknowledge and regrade people's lives.

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Narrative therapy describes as a 'definitional ceremony' the reflecting team process and the reflecting team members are referred to as 'outsider witnesses'. One of the key aspects that define this process is that the reflecting team of outsider witnesses is required to answer questions that encourage acknowledgment rather than judgment. Another is that outsider witnesses are invited to engage one another in conversations about what they heard that resonated with them, what they were drawn to, and the images that were evoked. The concept of "outsider-witness response" (Russell et al., 2004; White, 2005) was used to maintain a more participative ethos in the interaction between the young people and researchers. Our reflecting team process was therefore adapted with this communicative approach (Russell et al., 2004, p. 73), which also originated in the field of counseling. Russell and Carey suggest, in reference to Michael White's (2005) concept of an "outsider-witness response", the following four steps: 1) Identifying the expression, 2) Describing the image, 3) Embodying responses, and 4) Acknowledging transport (Russell et al., 2004, p. 73; White, 2005, p. 17). In step 1, the observers are invited to choose something that has been said and that seems significant to them; in step 2, they are invited to say something about the image that was generated by this sentence or expression; in step 3, they are invited to establish a connection between their own experiences or values and those of the speaker; and in step 4, they reflect on how they are influenced by what has been said and how it can contribute to their own future lives (Christie et al., 2016; Fasching, 2020; White, 2007). These four steps were applied in the second of the three-part sequence structure (see "Reflection" in Figure 1). By means of this process and the four steps, the researchers were encouraged to include their own feelings and experiences in their reflection and to express them in images. It is through such "retellings that people experience their lives as joined around shared themes" (White, 2007, p. 166). This adaptation of the method helped to increase the involvement of the young people even further and to improve the communicative reflection, and thus cooperation, in the reflecting team. Below, we give one example of a researcher's (R) reflection to illustrate the use of visual language:

> Researcher: (...) What has impressed me a lot, or what I have thought, is that really all the youths are extremely good listeners. So, an image has come to me in which the young people have really big ears. So, they were listening really carefully all the time when someone else was speaking, so extremely good listeners. And that makes me think, for example, when I'm sitting in a coffee shop with a friend and she tells me something exciting, I also have these really big ears, so that I can listen really well. And what I have learned in the reflecting team is that maybe I should sometimes be a better listener again (record 02_RT 2_youth, page 51, lines 8–15).

This passage illustrates the effort to use visual language by using the image of "big ears for careful listening". The personal connection is made by speaking about going to a coffee shop. Young people are viewed as experts who can teach us something. Whilst there was a possibility that this reflection could become judgmental, the fact that the researcher spoke personally indicates that the comment was an acknowledgement of the young people. The reflecting team thus gave the researcher the idea to "become a better listener", just like the young people. As a self-critical observation, the use of youthful language was not very successful in this example, as the researcher did not use expressions or language typically used by the young people with disabilities themselves. The feedback of the young people to the adapted narration was positive, as shown by the following quotations:

> Y1: I found the observations which you made very good and clear.
> Y2: I think it's cool when you can watch how... I just like that.

DISCUSSION OF OUR PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

Reflecting teams were used as a participatory approach in the project to encourage the involvement of young people with disabilities. An appreciative and respectful attitude, accessible language, avoidance of negative attributions and construction of a safe space can be seen as ethical guiding principles for the implementation of the process of reflecting team sessions. As explained in this article, the reflecting team as a method has a particular structure that is determined by the academic researchers. When conducting the reflecting team sessions,

different roles were assigned to all the participants. By making the adaptations to the method as described in this article, we pursued the aim of making the reflecting team sessions even more participatory. The enhanced visual presentation of topic metaphors in the second and third reflecting team sessions (train metaphor and cooperation tree) encouraged the young people to participate more. Furthermore, the "outsider-witness response" concept (Russel et al., 2004; White, 2005) helped to transmit appreciation and respect as well as contents of reflection to the young people, which would not have been possible if Andersen's concept of the reflecting team had been strictly applied.

The reflection on the method revealed that flexibility was necessary for our participatory research with the young people when applying Anderson's reflecting team method (2011). Participatory research with young people requires intensive preparation in order to provide content and structure for the individual reflecting teams. It also requires an open-minded approach in terms of practical implementation. Accessibility is another important factor to ensure that all persons involved can share their expertise if they want to. In our study, accessibility was enhanced through spatial measures and the use of prepared materials such as posters and communication aids. Visualization techniques such as simple presentations and large font sizes were also used and special attention was paid to individual needs in order to enhance each participant's communicative possibilities (Fasching & Felbermayr, 2019). Another key factor was the provision of a space in which the young people would feel safe and comfortable and allow them to gain the necessary confidence to share their views and to communicate. For the multi-annual participatory research process, it was essential to use and maintain respectful and positive language throughout in order to enable a process based on mutual trust. For a qualitative research process, it is of the utmost importance to create a productive relationship between the partners, and this is especially true in participatory projects and participatory longitudinal research (Fasching & Felbermayr, 2022; Felbermayr et al., 2021; Wöhrer et al., 2021).

The hierarchy which manifests itself in the research context cannot be entirely avoided, since participation is rarely initiated by the target group but generally by the persons who find themselves in a dominant or privileged position. Researchers, therefore, adopt a significant role in implementing participatory strategies during the preparation phase and in the research itself. The "researcher/researched relations" (Detamore, 2010, p. 167) are subject to multiple dynamics and require continuous reflection throughout a research project. On the scale model of participation of Wright, von Unger, and Block (2010) (cited in von Unger, 2014, p. 40), from 0 "Non-participation" to 9 "Beyond participation", we would rank our participatory research with the young people at level 6 "Co-decision" (participation). We were able to achieve enhanced participation by making adaptations. However, we were unable to comply with several aspects required to reach level 9, such as the involvement of the participants in the planning, although we did succeed in involving the young people as co-researchers in the form of reflecting working groups (advisory group in Lewis et al., 2008) during analysis and interpretation (Fasching & Felbermayr, 2019). In a simplified way, Lewis et al. (2008) also speak of "strong and weak versions of this position". "In the strong version, disabled people are seen to be essential as co-researchers (...). The weak version involves disabled people centrally and genuinely, but not as full and equal researchers on the project" (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 78). We believe that through specific adaptations to the method and a flexible approach to making content decisions we were able to ensure more self-determination for the young people in the course of the research and were thus able to involve them more in the process. This brings us closer to the "strong version" of Lewis et al. (2008), setting off empowerment processes. We do want to remain self-critical, as in Oliver: "(...) that such a process could empower. But such empowerment is not something that can be given by the powerful; rather it is something that people do for themselves" (Lewis et al. 2008, p. 78). Regardless of the fact that participatory research depends on the time and financial resources of a project, in future research we would involve the research participants in the research as early as possible, in line with Wöhrer et al. (2021, p. 3) who state that "(...) target groups should be involved as soon as possible in a research process in their role as co-researchers who develop research questions, research design, and goals, collect and analyze data and take part in the evaluation and impact assessment during and after a project".

CONCLUSIONS FOR PARTICIPATIVE COOPERATION

This paper analyzes a participatory method to involve young people with disabilities in research about participative cooperation by using reflecting teams. The reflecting team, more often used in a systemic counseling context, was adapted to provide a special form of group discussion for participatory research in a longitudinal study. Considering the many necessary research partnerships (parents, caregivers, community support providers, professionals, etc.) in this project, the balance between these perspectives with a focus on participatory research was centered on young people with disabilities. Due to their marginalized perspective in research, we wanted: a) to ensure that their voice was not lost, and b) to give them the opportunity to participate in the project.

Were we able to make the reflecting team even more participatory for the young people while at the same time investigating participative cooperation? With the adaptions that were made – giving young people, rather than a researcher, a role as moderator, inviting increased visualization within the reflecting process, and using an outsider-witness approach – more participation could be realized. The reflecting team stands out as a way of offering ample space to the experiences of young people with disabilities as co-researchers for reflection in the team and of illustrating their living realities and future planning, something that they also praised in the reflecting team sessions. The academic researcher must refrain as much as possible from giving any content input. In this way, the participants have the possibility to reflect on their experiences and to think actively about education and the future, as well as to make plans and decisions based on self-determination. Reflecting teams, in participatory research as well as in the context of ITP on equal terms, can be considered a method that serves to attain greater cooperation, participation and self-determination. In a participative space of cooperation it is possible to re-define roles and re-establish hierarchies.

In summary, the reflecting team circles and the data analysis in the longitudinal study show that the participative cooperation of young people with disabilities in the transition process can be successful when they are actively involved and are able to experience their roles and activity over time (see Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5). Same-age peer groups empower young people to act independently and to see themselves as experts in their own world. Multiple changes and perspectives and adjustments of power relations in the systemic approach of reflection team circles over time help to make this empowerment tangible and to strengthen young people with disabilities. Empowerments require reflection in professional working relationships and in the context of participation. For example, the results show that communication and reflection, as well as different support measures over time, are highly significant for young people with disabilities in transition planning. This highlights the importance of "mentorship" in the peer group of the young people and also between the researchers and co-researchers. As one of the most important support principles in the transition planning process, mentorship was experienced by the young people with disabilities in the reflecting team circles. This result is of special importance for research into participative cooperation which to date has generated very few results. An added value of this study lies in the systemic entanglements from the perspectives of researchers and experts.

IMPLICATIONS

Processes of participative cooperation can play a special role when putting inclusion into practice. Reflecting teams can be seen as inclusive spaces where an atmosphere of open and equal dialogue can be created among all parties. The added value of our participatory research in reflecting teams with young people with disabilities lies in the interlacing of the perspectives of different disciplines and different actors in the practical field (transdisciplinary). Extended research and increased usage of reflecting teams in practical transition planning are strongly recommended. They are extremely relevant for optimizing participative cooperation in transition planning in Austria and beyond.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENTS

As the qualitative data were collected from a small and vulnerable target group (young people with disabilities), the data used in the research project have not been made available to the scientific public. The main reason is – in accordance with research ethics – protection of the target group.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

Instead of the Declaration of Helsiniki, a statement of ethical principles for medical research, we oriented our work on ethical principles which are common in social sciences. Therefore, the recommendations of the German Society for Sociologists (DGS & BDS 2018), the German Society for Educational Science (DGfE 2010) and the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2011) served as orientation for our qualitative social research.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

(1) Project conception and design: HF (2) Project instrument design: HF (3) Data collection: HF, KF (4) Analysis and interpretation of results: HF, KF (5) Draft manuscript and preparation: HF, KF (6) Critical revision of manuscript for important intellectual content: HF, KF, LT. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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