The Impact of Using Research on Teaching Practices of Non-Teacher Practitioners within German All-Day Schools

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Abstract: According to the literature, practitioners' use of research appears to play an important role in facilitating high-quality applied practice. Previous studies indicate that teachers have a positive attitude towards using research, but that they are rarely successful in implementing it in their actual practice. There appears to be a scarcity of studies that have considered the non-teacher practitioner. This paper analyses interviews conducted with non-teacher practitioners (n=20) who work in extracurricular programmes of German primary and secondary all-day schools. The interview data suggests that some practitioners gather evidence to inform their practices. A deeper analysis of two cases revealed how research was transferred into action. They provided examples of how practitioners could use research to improve their approach with children and young people. The conclusion of this paper emphasises the need to foster evidence-based practices, as well as rigorous problem-solving and decision-making, in the field of extended education.

Keywords: use of research, evidence-based practice, non-teacher practitioners, German all-day school (*Ganztagsschule*)

Introduction and Research Questions

Quality teaching is linked to a number of positive pupil outcomes within the extended education field (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Huang, La Torre Matrundola and Leon (2014) identified staff support, experience and training as contributing to effective programme organisation. In addition, they identified other aspects such as warm and positive relationships between practitioners and their pupils.

Yet, the role of a practitioner within extended educational contexts can be associated with tensions and ambivalences. Practitioners have to balance centrally developed policy that sets the goals for their "real world" practices with children and young people with their own skills and experiences (Andersson, 2010; Hjalmarsson, 2013; Närvänen & Elvstrand, 2015). In addition, the collaboration of practitioners with other staff members appears to be a complex task (Böhm-Kasper, Dizinger, & Gausling, 2016; du Bois-Reymond, 2013; Holm, 2015; Schüpbach & von Allmen, 2013).

The challenges of extended educational practices will increase even more in the coming years. For example, a) the development of more individualised approaches,

b) the need to accommodate a more diverse range of learners (e.g. due to developments towards 'inclusion' – the integration of pupils with a range of learning, social-emotional and behavioural needs in mainstream contexts) and c) the social acceleration (Rosa, 2003) causes the 'half-life' of relevant information about effective practice to become increasingly shorter. Practitioners must continuously undertake investigations (formal and informal) in order to keep up with the pace of change (e.g. stay familiar with new approaches, strategies and implement them into their own practices; continuously observe upcoming issues and ways of dealing with them. Examples are the rise of cyber-bullying and spread of pornographic content through the use of smart phones and other social media by children and young people).

Loosely based on a definition by Levin, Cooper, Arjomand, and Thompson (2011), *research* within this study can be understood as a systematic gathering of empirical evidence to address practical problems of teaching. This might mean reading journal articles and books, checking the internet, etc., but also conducting action research on one's own. Visiting research conferences or (research-based) advanced training and systematically observing other practitioners also counts as research in this wider sense. So the *utilisation* of research refers to processes of the practitioner translating research knowledge into actionable practice. For a description of some of these factors, we refer to the paper by Kielblock and Monsen (2016). This study focusses both aspects: whether practitioners systematically gather information and whether they use this information to improve their practice.

Due to ongoing developments in Germany regarding the reorganisation from a half-day school system (which was very much based on classes that were exclusively provided by teachers) to an all-day school system (which involves different types of practitioners in the extended non-curricular context), non-teacher practitioners are becoming increasingly important as companions for pupils (Stecher, 2011). This paper focuses on these non-teacher practitioners within German all-day schools. We ask how non-teacher practitioners (within German all-day schools) integrate research (in the sense of being a "new scientist-practitioner" as described by Kielblock & Monsen, 2016) into their practices.

Review of the Literature

Although there is a range of studies on research utilisation published before 2000 (for example: Gitlin, Barlow, Burbank, Kauchak, & Stevens, 1999; Hubermann, 1993; Shkedi, 1998; Zeuli, 1994) and serious debates occurred in the 1990s (e.g. the Hargreave-Hemmersely dispute: Hammersley, 1997, 2000; Hargreaves, 1996, 1997), the following literature review focusses on the past 15 years post 2000. During this period there has been an increasing interest and a growing body of research in this field around the world.

The literature search revealed that practitioners have more or less positive attitudes towards the use of research (Hamilton, Chen, Pillemer, & Meador, 2013; Pendry & Husbands, 2000; Williams & Coles, 2007). Teachers consider educational research findings useful for their own continuing professional development (Pendry

& Husbands, 2000) and are motivated to use research evidence (Williams & Coles, 2007).

The literature highlighted that two-thirds of practitioners consult research findings of some kind (Beycioglu, Ozer, & Uğurlu, 2010; Borg, 2007, 2009; Papaso tiriou & Hannan, 2006). This includes reading (Borg, 2007, 2009), consulting (Papasotiriou & Hannan, 2006) and also "seriously considering" research findings (Beycioglu et al., 2010).

The literature revealed various findings concerning the sources of research and access to findings (Beycioglu et al., 2010; Cooper, 2014; Hamilton et al., 2013; Williams & Coles, 2007). There is evidence that academic journals are the most popular source of information (Beycioglu et al., 2010). However, in another study by Hamilton et al. (2013) they found that practitioners preferred the World Wide Web. On the whole, teachers and head teachers are much more confident about finding *general* information as opposed to *research* information (Williams & Coles, 2007). For example, only about 60 per cent were confident about locating *research* information concerning a specific topic, while 90 per cent were confident of locating *general* information (Williams & Coles, 2007).

Besides reading and finding research, a major issue is applying research to everyday practices. Teachers do not feel very confident in overcoming the research to the practice gap (Papasotiriou & Hannan, 2006; Williams & Coles, 2007). Papasotiriou and Hannan (2006) found that half of the interviewed Greek teachers "who read research did not apply what they read to their everyday practice" (Papasotiriou & Hannan, 2006, p. 368). Teachers "based their practice on common sense and experience" (Papasotiriou & Hannan, 2006, p. 370). Here again, it seems to make a difference whether general information or research information is evaluated and used: Practitioners are less confident about using *research* information in contrast to *general* information (Williams & Coles, 2007).

The literature showed that some practitioners were involved in conducting research themselves (Borg, 2007, 2009; Papasotiriou & Hannan, 2006). Teachers reported that they had participated in research projects (Papasotiriou & Hannan, 2006) and were personally conducting research (Borg, 2007, 2009).

The literature describes barriers that may lead to the non-use of research (Borg, 2007, 2009; Hamilton et al., 2013; Landrum, Cook, Tankersley, & Fitzgerald, 2002; Manuel, Mullen, Fang, Bellamy, & Bledsoe, 2009; Nassaji, 2012; Papasotiriou & Hannan, 2006; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). The barriers identified covered a lack of time for reading and doing research (Borg, 2007, 2009; Hamilton et al., 2013), a lack of personal interest (Borg, 2007, 2009) and problems in understanding research findings (Borg, 2009; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Issues about the appropriateness of the research to inform "real-life" practice (Borg, 2007, 2009; Manuel et al., 2009; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010), as well as the accessibility of research findings (Borg, 2009), are all problematic. For many practitioners colleagues and life experience are seen as being better resources for practical advice than research findings (Landrum et al., 2002; Nassaji, 2012; Papasotiriou & Hannan, 2006). Teachers may not be actively undertaking research because they feel that their professional core is teaching rather than being an applied researcher (Borg, 2007).

The literature idenitifed a range of potential factors that could facilitate the use of research (Borg, 2007, 2009; Cherney, Povey, Head, Boreham, & Ferguson, 2012; Levin et al., 2011; Manuel et al., 2009; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). If using research is valued and there is dedicated time for reading and doing research it can happen (Manuel et al., 2009; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Funding and grants are also important in facilitating both the undertaking and the use of research (Cherney et al., 2012; Manuel et al., 2009). In addition, a facilitator is implementing a formalised organisational structure that stresses the use of research (Levin et al., 2011; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Research should be made accessible and relevant (Levin et al., 2011) so that it can be applied to practice (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). The benefits provided by using research to inform practice must be apparent (Cherney et al., 2012; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010), especially for those individuals involved. There is evidence that personal factors such as wanting to find better ways of teaching, continuing professional development or solving problems in teaching (Borg, 2007, 2009) facilitate research use among practitioners.

The literature revealed a range of factors that both hinder and support the undertaking and use of research. Two main issues informed the current study. First, although the literature search was not restricted to 'teachers' there was little information on non-teacher practitioner use of and attitude towards research. Consequently, we asked whether the findings are also true for non-teacher practitioners (e.g. within the German context). Second, the literature appears to reveal little about how non-teacher practitioners integrate research into their practices and whether research use makes a difference. Neither of these questions can be fully addressed within this study, but we would like to make an initial contribution in addressing them.

Methods

Study Context

The current study was based in Germany. 60 per cent of German schools are all-day schools that provide both classes and extracurricular activities (KMK, 2016; for details on all-day schools in Germany, see e.g. Stecher, 2011). The other 40 per cent are half-day schools that focus on traditional class based curriculum. 90 per cent of all-day schools have additional non-teacher staff members who are actively involved with pupils in the extracurricular time of the school day (StEG Konsortium, 2013, 2015). There are a variety of persons who are commonly referred to as non-teacher practitioners in Germany since there are no specifications to what qualification is required for this work. Most common depictions show childcare workers for young children with about 30 per cent as the largest group and social workers with about 10 per cent as the second largest group (Höhmann, Bergmann, & Gebauer, 2008). Newer analyses present a more heterogeneous picture showing that one-fourth of the practitioners have multiple qualifications (Kielblock & Gaiser, 2017).

The evidence presented in the next section originates from the second phase of the Study on the Development of All-day Schools (StEG; *Studie zur Entwicklung von*

Ganztagsschulen), which was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). In its first phase (2005–2011), the StEG broadly evaluated the implementation of all-day schools in Germany, a country that formerly had half-day schools as the most common form of education. The second phase of the study (2012–2015) focussed on more specific research questions. In addition to three other institutions that conducted the StEG in its second phase, the team at the Justus Liebig University Giessen, Germany (StEG-Q) analysed the quality and effectiveness of extracurricular activities. The data used in the following section stems from the StEG-Q study.

Table 1. Characteristics of the non-teacher practitioner sample.

School form	Pseudonym	Age	Part-/Full-time	Formal qualification
Primary	Ms A.	<30	part-time	other academic degree
Primary	Mr B.	31–40	full-time	pedagogue in special education (aca.) & caregiver in special education (voc.)
Primary	Ms C.	41–50	full-time	pedagogue in special education (aca.)
Primary	Ms D.	41–50	full-time	social worker (aca.)
Primary	Ms E.	41–50	full-time	geologist (doctorate) & coach (aca.)
Primary	Ms F.	41–50	full-time	other vocational training
Primary	Ms G.	41–50	part-time	other vocational training
Primary	Mr H.	51–60	full-time	childcare worker (voc.)
Primary	Ms I.	51–60	part-time	social worker (aca.)
Secondary	Mr P.	<30	voluntary	(not in training yet)
Secondary	Ms Q.	31–40	full-time	social worker (aca.)
Secondary	Ms R.	31–40	full-time	social worker (aca.)
Secondary	Ms S.	31–40	full-time	other academic degree
Secondary	Ms T.	41–50	full-time	librarian (voc.) & pedagogue (aca.)
Secondary	Ms U.	41–50	full-time	childcare worker (voc.)
Secondary	Ms V.	41–50	full-time	pedagogue (aca.)
Secondary	Ms W.	51–60	full-time	childcare worker (voc.) & social worker (aca.)
Secondary	Ms X.	51–60	full-time	childcare worker (voc.)
Secondary	Ms Y.	51–60	full-time	pedagogue (aca.)
Secondary	Ms Z.	/	full-time	other vocational training

Note: Categories for formal qualifications come from a short questionnaire after each interview. Abbreviations are used to indicate the qualification level: aca. = academic training; voc. = vocational training.

Locations and Study Participants

In 2013 and 2014, data was collected from nine different all-day primary and secondary schools in Hesse, Germany. The study focussed on collecting in-depth information on the perspectives of pupils, teachers and non-teacher staff.

For the interviews with non-teacher practitioners, study participants were selected to represent a range of different professions, years of experience, and the amount of regular hours at the school, etc. It was recognised that it was more difficult to make an appointment with a practitioner if he/she had fewer working hours at the school. This selection bias can clearly be seen in the part-/full-time column in table 1.

The analysis presented in this study focussed only on the non-teacher staff. A sub-sample of 20 non-teacher practitioners was interviewed during the Autumn/Winter 2014.

Data Collection

The selected practitioners voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. The audiotaped interviews took on average about 17 minutes each (minimum of 8 minutes and maximum of 25 minutes).

The problem-centred interview (Witzel & Reiter, 2012) was used for data collection. This interview technique "integrates dialogic and narrative forms of communication throughout the whole interview communication" (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, p. 79). Relevant topics are listed on an interview guide that the interviewer has learnt before the session.

> *Opening question*: Imagine that a young person who just finished school is looking at different types of vocational training or academic studies. This person asks you what your job is like. What do you tell this person?
>
> *Relevant topics*: (a) definition of own job ("professional self-concept"), (b) possible/desired future direction of their current job, (c) inclusion and (d) possible/desired future of inclusion

The opening question and the relevant topics were piloted and changes made before being used in the current study. Since we were especially interested in the use of research as an *integral* part of the professional strategy we decided to use this very general opening question. We were aware that more specific questions would have resulted in richer descriptions and stimulated narratives about research utilisation from more interviewees. However, our focus in this study is clearly on those non-teacher practitioners who *inherently* stress a credible evidence base, rigorous problem-solving, etc., when they are asked "what is your job like?". We could interpret these cases as being what Kielblock and Monsen (2016) call the "new scientist-practitioner." Yet, this clearly does not mean that the others who did not mention research utilisation in their interviews do not value or use research.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed using the following steps. First, the interview audio files were transcribed verbatim. Each audio tape was then listend to and a list was made of the topics discussed (e.g. Bohnsack, 2010, refers to this as "topical structuring"). From this list relevant passages in the interviews which linked to the research questions were identified. Selected passages were then paraphrased in order to understand the meaning (which is also recommended as an analytic step by Bohnsack, 2010).

At this early stage of the analysis, each interview was treated as a single case study (Yin, 2009). Three heuristic questions were used as a conceptual framework for the analysis and guided case-related in-depth analysis: a) what is the everyday job like in general, b) what problems, exceptions, challenges or unpredictable situations does the job bring with it and c) what coping strategies does the interviewee use/suggest. Each of the three questions for each interviewee were answered by doing an in-depth analysis of the qualitative interview material within a compact case description. Then each narrative was compared (Charmaz, 2005) and three groups of practitioners were subsequently identified representing three different kinds of "professional strategies" – a "use of research strategy," a "research-oriented strategy" and a "non-research oriented strategy" (see Outcomes section).

Then we focused on two specific cases (Ms E. and Mr B.) for further in-depth analysis. These cases were selected because they provided rich examples of how research looks in the practice. Both practitioners incorporated the 'use of research' strategy. An explanatory case-study analysis was undertaken (Yin, 2009) with the focus being on explaining the practitioners' research utilisation strategy.

Outcomes

Different Research-Related Strategies

The comparative analysis led to three different groups being identified. The first had incorporated 'research use' as an explicit work-related strategy (n=3; 15%; Mr B., Ms E. and Ms T.). They held positive attitudes towards research and provided evidence that they utilise the information to inform their practices. The second group had a 'research-oriented' strategy (n=8; 40%; Ms C., Ms Q., Ms R., Ms U., Ms V., Ms W., Ms X. and Ms Y.). This means that they mentioned the importance of research and research-oriented information (e.g. high-quality advanced training, etc.), but provided no evidence during the interviews that their research was actually altering their practice. The third group followed a 'non-research-oriented' strategy (n=9; 45%; Ms A., Ms D., Ms F. Ms G., Mr H., Ms I., Ms P., Ms S. and Ms Z.), which meant that emphasis was placed upon (non-systematically gathered) personal experiences and personal advice from colleagues.

A Researcher's Stance Fosters Innovative Practice

Ms E. was the first case identified for in-depth consideration. She was in the 41–50-year-old age range and worked in the extracurricular programme of an all-day primary school. She had an academic background as a geologist and a PhD in marine geophysics. "I have many occupational identities because I originally came from academia" (Ms E.; F3; 16–17)[1]. However, she also saw herself as a 'pedagogue' at school. From her perspective, working as a non-teacher practitioner while also being a researcher made her professional profile unique.

In the interviews, Ms E. presented her *broad knowledge base*. For example, in one interview passage Ms E. discussed how neurosciences supported the idea that "relationships are very, very important" (Ms E.; F2; 13–16). Relationship building seemed to be a major facet of her approach, and she worked on developing positive relationships with her pupils as a necessary prerequisite for teaching (cf. Ms E.; F3; 19–22). Another example was that she placed an emphasis on the fact that a pedagogue needs to have "a great deal of background knowledge so that you can answer the questions that the children have. This also includes questions that are not directly on the track of the regular curriculum. Sometimes this is a challenge" (Ms E.; F2; 18–20).

In her opinion, especially non-teacher practitioners may "have the time that allows them to look to the left and right of the main track because they are not so deeply involved in the bureaucracy. I have the impression that teachers are no longer able to do this. They are so absorbed that they do not have enough time […]" (Ms E.; F2; 43–46). These passages clearly showed that she did not believe that her position as a non-teacher practitioner was a shortcoming; instead, it is a specific strength and has potential. As a non-teacher professional, she had the time to accumulate a broad knowledge base so that she was well-prepared in most educational situations.

Ms E. was an active member of the committee on "Out-of-School Learning" at a major teaching association (the name of the association is not given to protect the anonymity of Ms E.). From her perspective, the meetings of the association are a good opportunity for gathering new concepts to improve her own practice. She said: "I believe that this is where you can learn very well from each other – and exchange fresh ideas" (MS E.; F1; 226–230).

Her teaching repertoire appeared to grow as a result of attending conferences. Ms E. was convinced that a good practitioner was curious and active: "An intelligent person […] tries to learn things and then becomes active instead of simply sitting around and looking at what others do and doing what another person tells you to do" (Ms E.; F3; 25–30). She expressed concern that some people did not master the transfer from concepts into practices. She pointed out that these people seemed to simply take the practice recipe knowledge for granted. Her strategy was generally based on the utilisation of research. This facilitated the way that she embraced a comprehensive repertoire of teaching concepts, which were based on the best available information.

1 Citation format: F1=1. Field work phase (autumn/winter 2013), F2=2. Field work phase (spring/summer 2014), F3=3. Field work phase (autumn/winter 2014). The following numerals = line number in the transcript.

Ms E. mentioned that she had recently had to deal with pupils who were a "little more difficult." Right before the interview, she participated in an advanced training session on Non-Violent Communication. Now she tries "to transfer a little bit of it, in the sense of Rosenberg" into her practice (her interviews were actually full of the "big names" in educational research) and described her conviction that this has "enormous value" for the pupils (Ms E.; F1; 108–112). This example showed that she succeeded in interlinking newly gathered information (in this case, from the advanced training session) into her everyday practice. She implemented new ideas in her work and stressed their importance for the pupils.

Practical Problems can be Managed More Effectively by Using Research

Mr B. was chosen as a second case for in-depth consideration. He was in the 31–40-year-old age range and director of a daycare centre that collaborated with an all-day primary school. The daycare centre provided most of the extracurricular care time so that the primary school could be called an all-day school. Mr B. was a caregiver in special education (vocational training) and also a pedagogue in special education (academic training). Like Ms E., Mr B. appeared to be a 'researcher' during the interviews. He strongly emphasised knowledge and staying up-to-date. His narratives also included many big names and concepts in educational research. Moreover, he provided empirical evidence that his conceptualisations were applied rigorously in solving practice problems.

In contrast to Ms E., Mr B. almost always spoke of "we" as a team (and not "I") when he described his work. In the passage discussed below, he was not the only person who had the solution for a problematic issue. The whole team observed the situation, gathered ideas from the literature and then implemented the advice drawn from these sources.

The following example illustrates a new facet that was not as apparent in the analysis of the Ms E. interivew. In this passage, Mr B. explained how research was utilized to improve problem-solving:

> "We have a new child here. This child's parents became exasperated because he refused to do his homework at home. This turned into a fight, and he wouldn't do his homework. Then he came to us, and we observed the child and the situation. We thought about how we can conceptualise what we observed. We did not think that he, as a fourth grader, must know this and that. Instead, we focussed on his problems. Where could we possibly find research literature or the like for his case? One colleague in particular found something and said: 'This learning type that I found reflects the child relatively well. So let's apply the ideas and advice for this learning type to this child.' Since then, there is no more frustration: The child is not frustrated and there is no more frustration at home." (Mr B.; F3; 268–303)

In this passage, the act of consulting the research literature had a positive effect on the teaching practices. It becomes clear that the teams' systematic approach led to an adequate conceptualisation of the situation. Implementing the advice given in the literature resulted in positive outcomes for the child, but also for everyone else involved (practitioners, parents, etc.).

Discussion

This study emphasises research utilisation as a relevant topic within extended educational research. It presented evidence that three distinct groups of non-teacher practitioners could be identified from the sample of 20 in terms of the degree to which they used research to inform their practice: a use of research strategy, a research-oriented strategy and a non-research oriented strategy. In-depth analyses showed that innovative practice become apparent when a practitioner adopted a more scientist-practitioner stance.

In light of the methodological approach adopted in this research study there are both strengths and limitations. The qualitative sampling technique might have underestimated the possible range of cases. For example, this might influence how the three groups of diverse professional strategies are generated: If there were completely different cases in the sample, these three groups might have looked different or even more groups could be found. A second limitation is that the specific context plays a crucial role for research utilisation (as mentioned earlier, Mr B. acted as part of a team and Ms E. operated more or less on her own). It was not possible in this initial exploratory study to go into anymore depth on this important area. Future studies may allow more explicit reflections on how the complex context affects research use. The methods used have potential strengths as well. The interviewees were not explicitly asked about their use of research. The rationale for this was that the interviewees would be open to share their self-conceptions and professional strategies in order to analyse whether research utilisation was deeply rooted within the individuals' strategy.

The conceptualisation of three distinct groups in terms of their *professional strategies* may be useful in explaining what we know from the literature: the relatively high proportion of those *considering* research (both the research-use strategy and the research-oriented strategy) and the low proportion of those *applying* research (just the research-use strategy).

Overall, the current study is consistent with the literature presented earlier in this study. For example time is being a critical factor in enabling research utilisation (Borg, 2007, 2009; Hamilton et al., 2013; Manuel et al., 2009; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Both case studies support the impression that it is time-consuming to continuously keep one's own knowledge current (Ms E.) and solve problems using the best available research information (Mr B.). Yet, the analysis showed that it can be possible to invest this time under specific circumstances. For example, Mr B.'s daycare centre team had so many obligations that it would have not been surprising if they had said that it was impossible to do an individualised investigation for just one child. Yet, the evidence showed that the daycare centre team *takes* the time for the children who need more attention. One interesting reflection was that Mr B. expressed this approach as being a normal obligation of his job. (As a reminder: The interviews in this study focussed the professional self-understanding and not e.g. individualised forms of support.).

Both of the cases are valuable for presenting examples of what research use can look like in the practice. This may not only be helpful to researchers in our research

field but also to staff in the sector of extended education. From an international perspective, we are starting to understand the many positive outcomes of practitioners' research use. We acknowledge that Germany is beginning to embrace more evidence-based practices in the extended educational sector. Yet, it is hoped that this study provides some suggestions for the future direction of educational policy, practice and research.

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