Teachers and teaching assistants working together to support children with difficulties in learning: ‘challenging complacency about what is not otherwise available’

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ABSTRACT

This paper, part of a doctoral study on how teachers and TAs collaborate to support each other so as to support the inclusion of the children, draws from classroom observations and interviews to show how team members articulate their collaborative and supportive practices. Starting from an analysis of one particular case in which a child refused the support of a TA, it will argue that when the collaboration is effective teachers and TAs use roles and responsibilities flexibly, share authoritative spaces, and draw different lines of professional demarcation which enable them and children to communicate and resolve problems.

The aim of the paper is that of critically exploring the notion of support and of showing that support is effective when the adults are able and enabled to challenge common sense and complacent views about what is already available. Ultimately, it will argue that it is by building a ‘listening’ classroom community that alternative solutions to what could be otherwise available can be found.

Introduction

Exploring the notion and practice of support in relation to the inclusion of children labelled as having special educational needs is complex, and controversial. Without being overly polemical, part of the problem is that a managerial and functional perspective conceives it as a means towards the achievement of a set of related aims, which can be summarised in the broad notion of fulfilling the potential and wellbeing of all children. While I do not disagree on the idea that support is a means, I argue for a redefinition and appraisal of its features and dynamics. In so doing, I contend that the nature of support is not solely technical, as a way to control and achieve external goals, but rather practical and emancipatory. The distinction between these three goals is based on Habermas’ (1971) theory of knowledge and the human interests that underline the acquisition, use and transformation of knowledge. Bohman (1999: 57) describes the knowledge-constitutive-interest as:

- ‘the technical cognitive interest’ aims at control, and is connected with nomological sciences;
- the practical interest of the hermeneutic-historical sciences aims at increasing mutual understanding and unimpeded communication;
- the emancipatory interest of critically oriented sciences aims at liberating human beings from relations of force, unconscious constraints and dependence on hypostatized powers’ (emphasis in bold added).
According to Habermas’ analysis of human knowledge, people interact by seeking and using practical knowledge that is both phenomenological and hermeneutic in nature. Through communication they get to know each other’s positions, validate claims to truth and thus they can evaluate the technical options available to them. Ultimately, though, both the technical and the practical interests should serve the emancipatory interest. While Habermas defines it as the application of ideology critique, that is of rational communication, to the need to free oneself from power structures of coercion, I define it more broadly as the a set of opportunities that enable ‘the freedom that people have, to be and do the things they have reason to value’ (Florian, Devecchi and Dee, 2007, emphasis in the original). Dee, Devecchi and Florian (2006: ???) further defines the three interrelated purposes of being, having and doing as follows:

- **being** (developing a sense of and belief in one’s own identity and who we want to become);
- **having** (acquiring new skills, knowledge and understanding and accessing new opportunities);
- **doing** (becoming empowered to participate, and being enabled to participate).

In this sense support becomes pivotal to the purpose of enabling children and adults to have the knowledge, skills and understanding they require to succeed, to be and become as part of a social group, and finally to apply knowledge as fully-fledged members of their community so as to have a voice in the decisions that are taken regarding their personal wellbeing and that of the others.

In more pragmatic and empirical terms, though, social, and professional attitudes can create uncritically accepted ways of being and doing that can become barriers to the enactment of supportive and inclusive practice. It is beyond question that the way in which the notion of support has developed in the last thirty years has been closely related to the drive towards inclusion, the aim of raising academic standards, second, and, finally, that of reducing the workload of teachers. In all three cases the debate is ongoing. With regard to inclusion, the discussion is about the nature, definition and implementation of inclusion. It is not the intent of this paper to delve into the debate. It is nonetheless worth mentioning that critics might well agree with Pirrie and Head (2007: 19, emphasis added) when they talk about ‘the enduring fascination with inclusion’. Their argument revolves around the inclusivists’ lack of critical or self-critical examination of the goals and practices that should support inclusion. Admittedly, even within the inclusion camp there is a lack of consensual agreement but this is viewed as a healthy debate around the idea that inclusion is an ongoing process, for ever in tension with exclusionary forces, and for ever seeking a solution to pragmatic and idiosyncratic problems as they arise on a daily basis. Is this a delusion? An illusion? Or collusion amongst inclusivists who cannot accept the possibility of failure? Or is it just possible that inclusion, like support and collaboration is all around us and we do not see it?

Planning, delivering and managing the provision for inclusion of which support is a pivotal part is indeed a complex enterprise which involves a great number of people, professional or otherwise, working in school and outside schools. It also involves changing the culture of the school and thus its organisational and pedagogical response. Above all it requires challenging and developing a different way of thinking about disability, ability, and difference. This last point is valid for talking about the children, but also about the adults who support them. Talking about difference and letting difference talk are at the heart of the drive towards that particular
form of development whose goal is that of fighting complacency, as Florian (2007) argues. Indeed, I would like to add it is complacency in the form of common sense satisfaction about what we are or told to be, and what we have already achieved that prevents, at times, the possibility of seeing and doing things otherwise. Complacency, though, takes many forms. I am particularly interested here in looking at the complacency of the idea that children must always accept with gratitude the support they get, even when this can actually be counter-effective. It is this attitudinal complacency, or the hegemonic almost unshakable belief that adults know best and that children are immature, needy and dependent (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004), that is under examination here.

However, data collected as part of a critical ethnographic doctoral study which set to explore the notion of collaborative support, namely how teachers and TAs collaborate to support each other so as to support the inclusion of the children, show that alternative practices and perspectives are possible. While the study validates the idea that supportive provision is the outcome of the efficient deployment of material, cognitive, human, and financial resources, it also shows that it is the human aspect that remains central in responding to the children’s needs. This paper will focus on one particularly problematic case so as to:

• Explore, analyse and critically discuss what lies behind the notion and practice of support;

• Unsettle the common sense idea that how we conceive and practice support is necessarily the best way;

• Show that effective collaboration takes place when the collaborators are able and enabled to go beyond complacency, that is, going beyond what is already available and find alternative solutions.

The intention is that of arguing that a meaningful and functional supportive practice rests on successfully fulfilling the practical interest of communication. This implies establishing and maintaining a classroom community in which teachers, TAs and the children are listened to and made to listen to each other.

Support as additional human resources: TAs as the solution, or TAs as the problem

By far the form of support that has a more direct impact on how children might experience inclusion is in many cases and above all for those children with a statement of special educational need, the one they receive from TAs. Since the publication of the Green Paper Excellence for All Children (DfEE, 1997) part of the solution to promoting and implementing inclusion has been that of improving the support for teachers and children in the form of support staff in general and teaching assistants in particular. It is not a surprise, therefore, that ‘people working in support roles are at the heart of school reform’ as Jacqui Smith, former Minister of State for School Standards, claimed in the introductory paragraphs of the Developing People to Support Learning report (TDA, 2006: 5). Although reading DfES statistics is problematic (Devecchi, 2007a), the number of TAs has increased dramatically in the last decade, from 61,300 to 148,500 (TDA, 2006: 7). 13,876 have registered in the higher level teaching assistants (HTLA) programme since it was launched in 2003 (DfES, 2003) and 6,872 have been awarded HLTA status, according to government sources (TDA, 2006).
The notion of having teaching assistants to support the social and academic inclusion of the weakest of our children is contentious to say the least. Research on the benefits of TAs is controversial and inconclusive, with some being strongly in favour of them on the count that they promote the social and personal development of the children (Howes, Farrell, Kaplan and Moss, 2003; Lacey, 2001, Ofsted, 2002, 2006), while others arguing the very opposite (MacBeath, et al, 2006). Even with regard to how TAs can have a positive impact on raising academic standards, research has come to face a brick wall (Howes, et al., 2003; Mujis and Reynolds, 2003). To some, the very presence of extra adults underlines exclusionary tendencies in as much as TAs reiterate a ‘negative’ difference, and in so doing set the child outside what is accepted as normal, namely being able to cope unaided. On the other hand, parents in particular see TAs as the objective and visible sign that their child is supported, looked after and cared for in a mainstream school environment that to many looks unkind, and competitive. Finally, despite being marginal, marginalised, or at best of liminal importance (Mansaray, 2006) TAs are by some teachers perceived as a threat to their professional integrity (Thompson, 2006; Wilkinson, 2005; Yarker, 2005), while others such as Quicke (2003) and Watkinson (2002, 2004) argue that TAs are unfairly treated since their knowledge, skills and expertise are outside the accepted parameters of professional practice.

The issues at stake here are many and over-generalisations located at opposite ends are easy to make, but unhelpful. Partly the problem of evaluating whether the use of TAs as additional human support is beneficial has to do with the goal we aim to achieve; partly, with the consequences of the unclear specification with regard to teachers and TAs’ roles and responsibilities. In the first case, the goals are defined in broad and mainly persuasive terms. So TAs, not unlike teachers, should promote the potential and wellbeing of the children. While both potential and wellbeing are worthwhile aims, neither the government nor the academia is clear on what either concept should entail. They, however, belong to the two main discursive values of inclusion and raising academic standards. Like them, therefore, they suffer of a split-purposive personality in as much as while the inclusive values promote community living, participation, collaboration and social justice, the values of raising academic standards are utilitarian in nature and they promote individual success, competition and of course failure. Generally, though, they consensually agree on the importance of promoting independence, self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, just to mention a few (see Halstead and Taylor, 1996; Haydon, 2006, for a more detailed analysis of values in education). Such a situation does not make the task of being of support easy. Consequently, teachers and TAs’ roles and responsibilities become confused, and blurred and this can have an impact on their professional relationship and collaboration (Devecchi, 2007a, 2007b). This situation is further complicated by assumptions about disability, ability, and above all childhood.

While research on the issues I raised is abundant and vast, albeit inconclusive and contradictory, not enough attention has so far being paid to the specific relationship between TAs and the children they are officially attached to. I came across it by chance when researching how teachers and TAs collaborate to support each other and the children. The study was carried out in a comprehensive secondary school which at the time of the study in 2005 had around 1250 11-16 year old children on roll, ten per cent labelled as having special educational needs. This rural, highly achieving school was chosen for its inclusive and collaborative practice on the bases of
LEA and Ofsted reports\textsuperscript{1}. Empirical data collected during two phases of fieldwork through the use of a variety of methods such as questionnaires, interviews, observations and school policy document analysis, were collected and used to explore how teachers and TAs worked together. The aim was that of answering the question of what was special about ‘collaborative support’ in order to shed light on the nature and dynamic relationship between collaboration, support and inclusion. For the sake of the research and of this paper, by inclusion I mean the ongoing and in situ conditions that through the enactment of the principles of equality, tolerance and respect (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006) promote and enable access and participation to all members of the school community.

The department responsible for setting up and managing the provision for inclusion was called ‘The Centre’. It was a space physically and metaphorically located ‘at’ the centre of the school. A team of twenty TAs, managed by a SENCo, a vice-SENCo and a member of the senior management team all with part-time teaching duties, constituted the heart of the inclusive provision. However, meeting the needs of the children was far more complex as shown in Fig. 1 next page. Three teams comprising five TAs and three teachers took part in the second phase of the research that focused on classroom and team supportive and collaborative practices. Lessons in Maths, French and Science were observed and they were then followed by interviews in which I sought to involve the participants in reflecting on how they supported each other and the children. The data we collectively constructed during the dialogue were then compared and cross-analysed with the findings from the first phase of the research in which I sought to understand how the school provided support in general. The intention was according to Carspecken (1996) that of working out the systemic and dynamic relationships between the school system and the agents within. A further layer of analysis was then applied to seek how macro-policies influenced school policies and team and individual practices.

Because the school worked in a collective and collaborative mode, focusing on the modus operandi of a single team is not truly representative. However, while there was a shared vision of the goals and principles that guided the community, individuals had to face and solve particular problems which stemmed from specific classroom interactions and which aimed to respond to the children’s needs as they arose. This is to say that, even in those cases where collective moral principles such as tolerance, respect and care normatively defines the parameters of acceptable practice, the enactment of such principles in daily human interactions requires the application of ethical judgement on the extent to which the moral norms are viable as guidance principles. This meant that side by side with fulfilling the technical interest of long and medium term planning, daily development required the adults to be flexible and adaptive. Their roles and responsibilities towards the children and each other, therefore, were clear and structured but also flexible enough to adapt the measures they had previously planned. Usually, this pragmatic process of ongoing evaluation was straightforwardly accomplished through the application of the practical interest of communication. So teachers and TAs met at the beginning or end of the lesson, during the termly liaison meetings, or whenever the need arose. Yet, at times being flexible and adaptive required the adults to face the inevitable truth that their presence was more a hinder than a support.

\textsuperscript{1} For confidentiality reasons and as requested by the school itself, neither the name of the LEA, nor a reference to the Ofsted report will be given. The school, however, is located in Cambridgeshire.
Suzy and Jane don’t get on

This was the case for the relationship between Jane and Suzy. The story is very simple, and yet belying layers of complexity. Jane had been officially charged as part of the requirements stated in Suzy’s statement of special educational needs with supporting her on a one-to-one basis in a number of subjects. Other TAs had the same responsibilities for other subjects and so Suzy was supported by a number of different TAs as it is the case in secondary schools. In the episode in question, Jane collaborated with Linda, who had been working as a TA in school for sixteen years, and Helen, a part-time Science teacher who had extensive experience of teaching a range of students with different abilities, but who taught mainly bottom sets. They were observed working with a Year 8 bottom set class of 20 children in a Chemistry lesson. Two of the
children, Suzy and Chloe, had a statement of special educational needs, while the other children were on any of the stages of the SEN Code of Practice (DfES, 2001), or mostly on the school register for monitoring. Linda was attached to Chloe whom she sat next to for most of the lessons. Chloe had Down syndrome, was shy and quiet, but otherwise keen and hard-working and appreciated the presence of TAs and worked well with them. Suzy was a different character all together.

Teachers and TAs described Suzy as boisterous and full of mischief, but also stubborn and single-minded, at times keen to participate, at others prone to daydreaming if not self-exclusion. On the whole she was easily distracted, and her mood changed from lesson to lesson, from TA to TA, from teacher to teacher and very much dependent on where she was sitting and with whom she was sitting, what happened the lesson before, what was going to happen the lesson after and what was happening at home. Her mood swings could take place in the same lesson and change many times over. Suzy had been statemented for a hearing impairment which until few years ago was total until she had a cochlear implant. Now, she could lip read, but teachers and TAs used a microphone when necessary. However, Suzy refused at times to switch her implant on, and lip reading required great effort and concentration on her part, and appropriate seating facing the teacher. Like in the case of Holly, a Year 9 girl with Down syndrome, and Jake, a Year 7 boy with autism, Suzy had a strong desire to be like everybody else. This meant not having a TA attached to her. The negative connotations attached to the presence of TAs were confirmed by talking to the other children in her Science class who claimed that they did not need a TA because they were not like Chloe and Suzy. Yet, they did not refuse the help of TAs and on more than one occasions they were observed actively seeking Linda or Jane’s support. More research needs to be done to shed light on how children construe the relationship between needing support and being ‘normal’, that is, able to cope without support. For the time being and within the context of the Science group, TAs’ support was construed as a marker of disability for Suzy, as a reassuring practice for Chloe, and as a utilitarian notion and a pragmatic choice for the other children.

Besides the presence of a TA, various other provisions were put in place to enable Suzy to have access to the curriculum and participate in the life of the school community, or, phrased otherwise, to reach her potential and achieve her well-being. Some stemmed from a medicalised ‘within the child’ problem identification and therefore provision was aimed to improve her hearing, speaking and vocabulary building abilities. This strategy meant weekly withdrawal lessons during which a hearing specialist worked with a TA who had had experience of helping with literacy in primary schools. The two adults would plan specific exercises, seek resources, monitor and assess Suzy’s progress. The TA was responsible for informing other TAs and teachers and collect information from them. The goal of this provision was that of enabling Suzy to become more independent, that is able to cope by herself with the academic demands. Other forms of independence were more problematic. One constant issue was how Suzy related differently to different people. Particularly interesting was the fact that while she engaged mostly with the TAs – or maybe had no choice on the matter-, she also resented the close relationship and the physical closeness of a TA hovering over her. It could be argued that in Vygotskian terms there was a problem with removing the scaffolding of support which while aiming to increase Suzy’s independence, also reiterated her dependence, and thus her disability. However, she worked well with Michaela in Maths as evident from the classroom observations. She had most problems with Jane and this caused Jane more than a reason for concern since the refusal of support went deeper than being a simple show of single-mindedness. In fact it hurt at the very heart of Jane’s views about being supportive which, she explained, entailed thinking that children:
Are individuals and you have to respect them as individuals and work round their issues in their lives and everything.

While this reflected the normative principles of how, according to teachers, TAs and the SENCo, the school viewed children and valued them as persons, putting such high ideals in practice was challenging. Thus, Jane found it hard to reconcile Suzy’s dislike for her support and her intent and obligations to pursue Suzy’s right to wellbeing. This is how Jane made sense of it:

[…] sometimes I think that this … maybe she is working better with me not sitting besides her, but there is something in my brain that I don’t like it, because I wish that it was different. But on the other hand, maybe because we are coming to the end of the term I might give her lots more … keep away quite a lot, and just encourage her and praise her every time…but I do.

Jane wished for her relationship with Suzy to be different. She wished Suzy to like her being sitting next to her, helping her with the task, reminding her about what to do, being there for her. However, the relationship clashed on the basic task of evaluating what wellbeing was about, and whose wellbeing was ultimately pursued.

Promoting interdependency: the ethics of reciprocal care

At the heart of providing support are a number of tensions which in the case under exploration can be summarised as tensions between what is already available in Habermesian technical terms, and the need to critically and pragmatically re-evaluate them. This process of norm re-evaluation constitutes a challenge for the complacent attitude of thinking that there are no alternative solutions to what is already available (Florian, 2007). Thus, if on the one hand Jane’s desire to help is morally commendable and thus legitimately acceptable, the technical solution of being physically close to Suzy is part of the problem. Actually, it is the evident manifestation of the problem. In reality complacency goes deeper into assumptions about practices which are hard to change since they belong to and embody the personal and professional formation of the carer’s identity and which, in turn, reify the identity of the child as dependent and in need. Thus, the clash between Suzy and Jane can be seen as one about a struggle for independence, autonomy and authority. Yet, the solution, as we shall see, is not in finding ways to build opportunities to pursue what each one of them has reason to value as an individual, but rather in finding a consensual compromise between the need to have one’s personal freedom legitimised and the duties and obligations to enable others to enjoy the same freedom. Challenging complacency, therefore, requires revisiting the concepts of care and support. Support in this case is not about filling in the gaps in what people cannot do, but an act of reciprocal empowerment that allows people to be accepted as different but compelled to behave differently. So as to understand how this works, it is better to go back to the field and examine how Helen and Jane supported Suzy.

It is a hot July afternoon, last two periods of the day. The Science room is wide, with traditional wooden tables surrounded by low wall cabinets with in-built sinks. The children, around 20 in
all, trickle in and are welcomed by Linda. Jane has a word with Helen and then comes to me to
tell me that Suzy is already in a ‘bad mood’. Something did not go right the previous lesson and
indeed when she arrives her look is defiant and angry. Suzy sits at one of the front tables, next to
Graham facing Linda and Chloe. In the previous lesson Jane and Suzy had worked together, or
so they were supposed to do but Suzy was un-cooperative, did not respond well to Jane’s
remarks and attention, was distracted and off task. Yet this was not the case in the Geography
lesson I had observed few days before, or in one of the Maths lessons, or for that matter in a
withdrawal lesson she had with her hearing therapist. Despite the shaky start, during the lesson
Suzy behaves, she is on task most of the time, works with Graham reasonably well, engages with
Linda and Helen, and she even volunteers to answer some of the questions during the plenary
session. Jane shares the responsibility of supporting the other children during the experiments
with Helen, while Linda keeps attending to Chloe, a shy girl with Down Syndrome. At times Jane
goes to check how Suzy is doing, but she avoids sitting next to her, asking too many questions,
and reminding her of what she is supposed to do. (fieldnotes observation).

What I had observed was the climax of a situation that had been brewing since the beginning of
the year as Helen says:

*I think it starts from … when I first took the class in September Chloe was assigned a TA who
has been long term sick. […] So we decided that Jane should work with Chloe because Chloe
was less integrated than Suzy. Suzy can at least make her feelings known. And so Suzy did not
have any TA support for the first four weeks and then Linda arrived and I think she then
resented the idea that suddenly she was going to have the support. She had four weeks of
independence and reporting to me and then all of a sudden she had a TA. It was alright for a
while and then their [Suzy’s and Jane’s] relationship had sort of … they are after each other all
the time.*

This brief account is full of valuable information on the decision making process regarding the
provision of support, but also about Jane and Suzy’s relationship. Nonetheless it makes difficult
reading especially with regards to dynamics of independence. Undoubtedly, Suzy enjoying ‘four
weeks of independence’ and a more ‘normal’ relationship with Helen was positive in as much as
it showed the adults that she could cope. As a matter of fact, they already knew that Suzy was
better ‘integrated’, more independent and more vocal than Chloe. However, the very same
independence was also challenging of the their authority, and of their personal and professional
identity. If the ultimate goal of their collaboration was to support the children’s well-being, than
this required to think otherwise in terms of the well-being of all members of the classroom since,
as Helen states

‘there are plenty of other children in this class that have problems and they could do with some
extra help and so I would rather not waste Jane’s time on focusing on Suzy if Suzy is going to
refuse help and so her time is much precious to me.

Helen’s statement underlines a mixture of utilitarian and functionalist interests which construe
the ethical dilemma of whom to care for and how. In as much as her responsibility as a teacher is
that of providing for the wellbeing of all the children, she cannot ‘waste’ Jane’s time and
support. Yet, she cannot forego her responsibility towards Suzy either, nor can she forgo her
duties towards the wellbeing of her assistant. It is at this stage that Helen and her TAs challenge the complacent view that one-to-one additional support is always best. It is also here that Helen challenges complacent views about professional boundaries which demarcate lines of authority. So Helen explains:

[…] Jane came in and she said she (Suzy) was ‘in a mood’ […] and I took Suzy outside and had a word with her before we started. […] I think that Jane felt she needed a bit of help with it so we had a discussion together and then I had a discussion with Suzy, and we then laid out new ground rules for her.

Helen, in this instance, takes on the role of broker, a role that usually is carried out by TAs. However, being a broker in a fractured relationship requires being approachable to listen to both parties as she does in order to evaluate what to do. If we take into consideration that Helen is legitimately the most powerful player in the act since she embodies both the moral authority of the carer, and the legitimate authority of the teacher we see that the dilemma of providing meaningful support is not just of technical nature. Rather, it is about redefining the ethical norms of caring. Thus, it requires re-empowering Jane of her lost sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy, while simultaneously making sure that Suzy is looked after and included in the process.

Helen does this by re-establishing channels of communication between Jane and Suzy through communication itself. Thus, her obligation is, therefore, to listen to both parties, and re-draw the ‘ground rules’. However, and this is important in the dynamics of this alternative conception of support as reciprocal care, Helen does not sanction Suzy’s behaviour by using repressive measures such as a detention, but rather by appealing to what Habermas (1987) views as the moral obligation of reciprocity. In more practical terms, this meant to find a compromise between Suzy’s desire to cope by herself, to be independent and autonomous, and Jane’s feelings of duty of care. So in the lesson in question, Jane ended up supporting the other children, and paying attention to Suzy every now and then. Helen took on the main role of being Suzy’s aid, and Linda filled the gaps when either Jane or Helen were busy with the rest of the class. In so doing, they challenged without subverting also well-established professional boundaries in as much as all adults were carrying out teaching roles, while simultaneously satisfying their moral obligations towards reciprocal care and support.

Final considerations

This paper set to explore the notion of support by focusing on how through collaboration teachers and TAs can go beyond complacent views on what it means caring for the children. I have used the idea that an ethics of reciprocal care was at the heart of the team’s ability to go beyond common sense accepted practices. Reporting the complexity of the team response was hard mainly because it was ongoing, reiterative, and associated with a variety of other forms of provisions that impacted directly or indirectly on how the adults, Suzy and the other children reacted. Nonetheless, what remains important is the fact that they managed to establish a process which by taking into account the need and interests of everybody, shifted the perception of TAs as ‘additional to’ and as markers of difference for the children, into an integrated part of the effort to provide support for them. Indeed, and probably paradoxically, it was the TA Suzy did
not want to work with who acted on her behalf. But it was also Helen’s willingness to listen and to act on behalf of both parties that established the possibility of reconciliation.

I do not claim to have settled the many questions about this very common, and yet very complex human interaction. However, I have tried to propose a preliminary and alternative way of looking at support. To do this I have used, rather liberally, Florian’s (2007: 15) insights into the need to fight complacency ‘about what is not otherwise available’. In particular, I have broaden her insights into the debate about ‘special’ and inclusive provision, by arguing that TAs can indeed be conceived as ‘additional to’ or ‘different from’ that which is ‘otherwise available’, but that they can simultaneously be the vectors through which difference can count, as Minnow (1990) suggests. Above all, what matters in the case I chose to analyse is that the teacher and the TAs challenged complacent attitudes about the extent to which children can have the right to choose who supports them.

Yet, TAs cannot do this alone because complacency itself takes many forms and challenging it becomes a collective effort to find new solutions for old dilemmas. This is why Habermas’ (1971) theory of knowledge and human interests can offer a possible analytical and conceptual framework for evaluating the nature of complacency but also the way in which positive collective responses can be found (Habermas, 1989). Although my application of Habermas’ theories is at this stage requires further development, viewing support as grounded in the fulfilment of technical, practical and emancipatory interests allowed for an analysis of the problem, of the process towards finding a solution, and the ultimate goal of providing collective wellbeing for every member of the classroom. The same discourse can be valid for the application of the three purposes of being, having and doing (Dee, Devecchi and Florian, 2006).

What remains pivotal to understand is how notions of wellbeing are conceive and operationalised. Research on this matter is scant. Undoubtedly, to explore and explicate what is at the root of wellbeing is complex. We still know very little about how teachers, but mainly TAs elaborate and validate individually and together conception of the good. Even less is known about how children understand their wellbeing and most importantly how they relate this to the support they receive from TAs, as Cajkler et al (2006) suggest. While the conception of wellbeing used here is grounded on the fulfilment of what people have reason to be, to have and to do, more empirical research and conceptual development are necessary to understand the nature and dynamics of support.

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