

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF A MULTILINGUAL ELEMENTARY STUDENT ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM – A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Estimates predict that up to a quarter of children on the autism spectrum may grow up speaking more than one language. However, there is a dearth of research on the school experiences of multilingual children on the autism spectrum. The current study aimed to address the lack of research including multilingual children on the autism spectrum and their school experiences by focusing on the following questions: What are characteristics of the school experiences of a multilingual elementary student on the autism spectrum in an inclusive, monolingual setting; What are stakeholders' perspectives on multilingualism in children on the autism spectrum and how are these perspectives reflected in their practices? A case study was undertaken to observe the school experiences of a multilingual student on the autism spectrum in an inclusive elementary school in Germany. The method included semi-structured interviews with the student, the student's mother, the primary classroom teacher, the education assistant, and the school principal. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the interviews. In addition, an ethnographically informed observation of the school experiences was conducted, and field notes were collected and analyzed. Interviews and observations showed a lack of knowledge about multilingualism and autism by school personnel. None of the interviewed stakeholders had received professional development related to supporting multilingual students on the autism spectrum. The student overall reflected positively on their school experiences. The student's mother discussed that communication with the school was often difficult due to language barriers. Overall, more research and professional development opportunities are needed.

Keywords: *Autism spectrum disorder, bilingualism, multilingualism, inclusion.*

1. Introduction

Despite estimates that a significant number of children on the autism spectrum are likely to grow up in multilingual environments (Trelles & Castro, 2019), there is a dearth of research exploring the school experiences of multilingual children on the autism spectrum. Howard et al. (2019) interviewed 11 bilingual autistic children aged 7-14 in the UK regarding their school experiences. Results showed that students educated in multilingual settings reflected more positively on their multilingualism than their peers educated in monolingual contexts (Howard et al., 2019).

Both parents of children on the autism spectrum and practitioners have voiced concerns regarding the impact of multilingualism on the language development of children on the autism spectrum (Hampton et al., 2017; Howard et al., 2021) despite research showing no evidence of any detrimental effects of bilingual exposure for children on the autism spectrum (see Gilhuber et al., 2023, for a systematic review). In addition, parents of children on the autism spectrum have frequently reported receiving advice from practitioners to prioritize one language in their interactions with their child (Fernandez y Garcia et al., 2012; Kremer-Sadlik, 2005). Studies that gathered data from multilingual autistic adults found that they often reflected positively on their multilingualism and the impact on their lives (e.g., Digard et al., 2022).

2. Objectives

The current study occurred in Germany, where about 18 percent of all minors grow up in a household with a primary language other than German (Der Informationsdienst des Instituts der deutschen Wirtschaft, 2021). This study built on three questions that aimed to address the lack of research

focusing on the school experiences of multilingual students on the autism spectrum and the perspectives of the stakeholders involved in the education of multilingual students on the autism spectrum:

1. What are characteristics of the school experiences of a multilingual elementary student on the autism spectrum in an inclusive, monolingual setting?
2. What are stakeholders' perspectives on multilingualism in children on the autism spectrum?
3. How are stakeholders' perspectives on multilingualism in children on the autism spectrum reflected in their daily practices?

3. Methods

The current study consisted of an ethnographically informed case study that included semi-structured interviews with a bilingual, fourth-grade student on the autism spectrum and the primary stakeholders (parent, primary teacher, education assistant, and principal) involved in the student's education in an inclusive, general education classroom setting in a rural town in the south of Germany. In addition to interviews, the principal investigator conducted an ethnographically informed observation of the day-to-day school practices, following the student's schedule for two days and collecting field notes.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2022) was used to interpret and analyze participants' responses. As a qualitative research method, IPA focuses on a phenomenological, ideographic analysis (Smith et al., 2022) of participants' experiences (Demuth & Mey, 2015). All interviews were conducted in 1:1 settings, audio-recorded, and transcribed. Transcript analysis included multiple re-reading, exploratory noting, and the development of experiential themes (Smith et al., 2022).

The Institutional Review Board of the Pennsylvania State University approved the current study. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.

4. Findings

At the time of the current study, Tom attended a fourth-grade classroom with 18 other students. In his classroom, Tom was one of six students with special educational needs and one of two students with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. Tom's first language was Romanian, the first language of his parents and the dominant language spoken in the family's home. Tom overall reflected positively on his school experiences. When asked which languages he liked, Tom indicated a preference for English, taught as a foreign language at the school he attended since third grade. Sophia, Tom's mother, and Antonia, the education assistant who supported Tom during the school day, both mentioned in interviews that Tom displayed great interest in English at home and at school.

Sophia, Antonia, and Katherine, Tom's classroom teacher, all reflected that communication between the home and school was sometimes difficult. When asked about the communication with the school, Sophia reflected that the limits of her proficiency in German negatively affected the communication, especially regarding the numerous documents the school sent home. Katherine, who was in her fifth year of teaching at the time of data collection, also discussed that communication with Tom's parents sometimes proved difficult due to the language barrier they experienced speaking German as a foreign language. Katherine also reflected on the limitation of a lack of access to an interpreter. Neither Katherine nor Martha, the school principal, reflected specific strategies to support multilingual students with disabilities. Martha and Katherine indicated that they primarily relied on Antonia to provide the additional support Tom needed.

5. Discussion

Tom overall reflected positively on his school experiences. He did not explicitly reflect on his own bilingualism but displayed an interest in languages, especially English. According to data from the interview and observations, the primary characteristics of Tom's educational experience were the monolingual instruction in German, the individual support he received from his education assistant, and his reflected satisfaction with school processes. Tom's mother discussed being satisfied with the support her son was receiving at school but reflected that communication with the school was sometimes difficult due to the language barrier she experienced.

The three participating educators identified as monolingual speakers of the dominant societal language and displayed a lack of understanding of multilingualism as a complex phenomenon and the implications of multilingualism and disability as intersecting identities. Stakeholders' daily practices reflected their perspectives on multilingualism. Discussions around language centered on strategies promoting the societal language German, not on utilizing bilingualism as an asset. None of the participating school personnel had received professional development in supporting multilingual students

on the autism spectrum. Previous studies have shown that experience and training can influence how educators perceive multilingualism (Camenzuli et al., 2023). All involved educators would have benefited from additional training to support Tom and other multilingual students with a diagnosed disability. More research is needed to reflect the school experiences of multilingual students on the autism spectrum and the perspectives of the stakeholders who work with multilingual autistic students and to develop evidence-based practices to support the needs of multilingual students with disabilities.

As a single case study, the current study reflects the unique experiences of one multilingual student on the autism spectrum. Additionally, the principal investigator could only attend the daily school practices for two days, which limited the data collection for the observation.

6. Conclusion

The individual experiences reflected in the current study showed that in a monolingual education context, stakeholders primarily focused on supporting the student in advancing his skills in the dominant societal language. Educators' perspectives reflected a lack of knowledge of culturally responsive strategies that build on bilingualism as an asset, a limited understanding of the intersection of disability and multilingualism, and a dearth of professional development opportunities for supporting multilingual students with disabilities. Educators need more support and training to utilize culturally responsive pedagogy to support culturally and linguistically diverse students and build on students' multilingualism as an asset. Additionally, more research is needed on the school experiences of multilingual students on the autism spectrum and the perspectives of stakeholders involved in their education.

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