

It is changed beyond all recognition: exploring the evolving habitus of assistants in special schools

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The assistant workforce is a constituent presence in all schools. Progressive reconfiguration of the role has resulted in a hybrid position, with assistants customarily navigating power relationships in the hierarchy of the school. This paper employs Bourdieu's theory of social fields, in particular, his system of relations, as a means to consider the intersection of habitus and capital amongst assistants in special schools in Northern Ireland. Using this analytic approach, focus group interviews with Classroom Assistants and Health Assistants explored their current deployment, their interaction with each other and with teachers. Data was collected from 47 participants across 7 special schools, with interviews transcribed and thematically analysed. Findings revealed assistants as a workforce in transition, whose conventional habitus has been steadily disrupted by a supply and demand culture often at variance with the origins of the post. Whilst such divergence has the potential to create a site of struggle, the burgeoning social and cultural capital held by assistants has, instead, re-configured their perceived position within the special school environment, creating more porous professional boundaries and an increasingly fluid professional identity. These explanatory insights offer a fresh perspective for further research into this pivotal yet under-researched group in Northern Ireland.

Introduction

The assistant workforce is a cornerstone of special education provision. Various described as Classroom Assistants,¹ Teaching Assistants, Learning Support Assistants and paraeducators, there has been an exponential increase in numbers in mainstream and special schools over the past few decades globally (Blatchford et al., 2012;

Navarro, 2015). Progressive re-configuration of this role has, however, generated a hybrid workforce who have had to navigate changing employment conditions and re-assess their role. This paper considers the experiences and perceptions of this workforce using a Bourdieusian theoretical lens. It proposes that Bourdieu's exposition of the *system of relations* that exists between individuals and groups provides a distinctive theoretical framework to explore the *habitus* and *capital* of assistants working in the *field* of special schools. Comprising a majority of Classroom Assistants (CA) and a smaller number of Health Assistants (encompassing physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and sensory support), the participants in this study are representative of a larger paraprofessional population increasingly deployed across the range of school settings (Smith, 2018). In the context of Northern Ireland, the research makes a significant and original contribution to illuminate the professional profile and status of this under-researched population. More generally, whilst the findings and discussion relate to the assistant workforce in special schools, they have wider relevance to assistants employed in mainstream settings.

Bourdieu's theoretical constructs are widely used in education research as '*thinking tools to illuminate social practice*' (Kloot, 2016, p. 134). Empirical education studies have applied his concepts to explore inequalities in education from a range of perspectives (Archer et al. 2018; Wiltshire et al., 2017) although thus far, there has been limited focus on special schools and less again on the assistants who work there (Colley and Guéry, 2015). The research presented in this paper shows how Bourdieu's triad of concepts (habitus, capital and field) provides an inventive avenue for exploring assistants' interpretations of their role and the emerging identity crisis wrought by excessive education reform. This framework also helps to unpack the hierarchical space of the classroom environment and the different staff members who occupy this stratified space. This innovative analytic approach is relevant, timely and necessary. The habitus of the assistant workforce in education merits scrutiny, not least since the nature and scale of their reformulation contrasts with the relatively lower capital they possess in the

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¹For the purposes of this paper, the generic term assistant is used throughout. The term Classroom Assistant where used, reflects the classification used in Northern Ireland.

hierarchy of the school. More intriguingly, assistants working in special schools inhabit a field that is not only differently proportioned from mainstream schools but, by its structure, has compelling potential to generate a more fluid, idiosyncratic interpretation of their role.

The social construct of education is testament to the nexus of individuals, groups and institutions that shape the character, pace and ethos of schools. Shaped as much by the people who populate the working environment as by governing policies and legislation, policy reform nationally and internationally has steadfastly directed the operational obligations of schools whilst at the same time re-shaping occupational and professional demographics (Leaton Gray and Whitty, 2010). In this societal microcosm, Bourdieu's (2001) conceptualisation of the social world – in particular, his relational stance between the locus (field), the experiences (habitus) that influence one's position in the field and the relative power (capital) held by individuals – is recreated frequently in school and classroom settings, where staff interactions reproduce established social structures in '*... an adherence to relations of order which ... are accepted as self-evident*' (Bourdieu, 1984, 471). As social fields, schools are dynamic sites where the practices of those inhabiting them are a series of transient, intersecting experiences shaped by different forms of habitus and amounts of capital (Tarabini et al., 2017). In this environment, the habitus occupied by teaching staff and support staff differs, primarily through the professional and cultural associations attached to each, with teachers' relative excess of capital reflected in their stronger position within the hierarchy of the school (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012). Notably, the number of Classroom Assistants are substantially greater here than in mainstream schools, with a higher ratio working alongside one teacher and a supplementary cluster of health assistants providing therapeutic support. The *volume and composition* (Bourdieu, 1984) of these assistants, therefore, create greater confluence in a field traditionally defined by compliant habitus and unchallenged capital.

The shifting role of the assistant

Professional identity amongst assistants is strongly shaped by their socialisation in a predominantly caring role where they are directed by, and work under, the supervision of senior colleagues (Leaton Gray and Whitty, 2010). In contrast, teachers' working practices are mediated by their training as well as the institutional contexts within which they work (Burke et al., 2013). Conceptualised as shared habitus of dispositions, habits and practices, the parameters of these roles define everyday interactions and intrinsically determine how individuals think, feel and act in certain situations. It is possible, therefore, to see how the school environment can sustain this pattern of teacher and assistant relations, where the established professional boundaries of teachers reinforce a compliant habitus occupied by assistants, thereby

inhibiting change. This precept accepts habitus as a fixed, deterministic position, yet 2001198520192019 conceptualisation suggests that it is neither permanent nor static, meaning that engrained social practices can be challenged and alternative patterns can begin to emerge (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Navarro, 2009). This suggests that the habitus of the assistant workforce is both malleable and open to variation.

Although the parameters of the assistant habitus have become re-configured, it nonetheless sits uneasily in a field where blurred professional boundaries continue to raise concerns (Douglas et al., 2016; Slater and Gazeley, 2019). Clearly, navigation and negotiation of engrained habitus cannot be left to chance; public service reform shows that contradicted habitus can generate dissonance, particularly where a mismatch exists between established and changing environments (McDonough and Polzer, 2012). More pertinently, education studies identifying teacher resistance to the 'creep effect' of assistants assuming pedagogic duties (Radford et al., 2015) sit alongside reporting of assistant dissatisfaction with deployment well beyond their pay grade (Keating and O'Connor, 2012). There is some precedent for an evolving habitus. Trainor (2010, p. 248) noted the '*... unique rules of engagement*' and specialised cultural and social capital of special education provision; McNamara Hovart and Davis (2011) suggested a more fluid interpretation of habitus can provide better understanding of social change; whilst Brown et al. (2017, 194) argued that habitus can be '*... challenged and changed through moments of crisis and creativity*'. Evidence also suggests that a collective or shared habitus can emerge where individuals work in proximity to each other; recent research in education and health fields found assistant-teacher and assistant-practitioner interactions generated respectful working relationships when grounded in reciprocal inter-dependence and shared expertise (Jung et al., 2008; Logan et al., 2019; McDermott, 2017). As the numbers of pupils with SEND increase, it is apparent that the boundaries of established habitus will also continue to expand if the needs of these children are to be fully met.

Like other social fields, education possesses its own forms of social and cultural capital whose availability, acquisition and use epitomise the power ration in schools. Access to capital is an uneven process, often driven by different interests and value systems that determine individuals' agency, autonomy and control within the hierarchy of the field (Abel and Frohlich, 2012; Collyer et al., 2017). In schools, differentiation between various forms of habitus automatically positions groups and individuals on a continuum of power determined by both the real and perceived capital they possess (Bottero, 2010; Hardy, 2012). The teacher–assistant dynamic is often presented as an asymmetric relationship, where assistants' social capital (relationships with teachers and others in the school, day-to-day interactions and informal

conversations) and cultural capital (knowledge and skills) does not match the dominant capital resources of specialised academic qualifications, pedagogic technique and collegial relationships. The variable degree of capital held by teachers, assistants and associated health professionals can influence perceptions of self and other (Greenstock and Wright, 2011). Research has shown that systemic accountability can reinforce a conservative teacher habitus, inhibiting creative and collaborative practice with assistant colleagues; such imbalance can lead to marginalisation in schools, contradiction between levels of responsibility and levels of power, and limited evidence of professional exchange (Giangreco et al., 2013; O'Toole and Kirkpatrick, 2007; Sharma and Salend, 2016). Yet, there is also evidence that this close working environment can foster reciprocal appreciation for the other and promote a climate for social and cultural exchange (Jones et al., 2012; Jung et al., 2008; McKean et al., 2017).

The research context

The incremental growth in the numbers of Classroom Assistants is based on an interplay of factors. Firstly, a trajectory of educational reform in the UK, notably from the 1990s onwards, saw the implementation of robust inclusive policy and legislation (DE, 1996). Although heralding a considerable transition from routinely segregated provision, special schools continue to occupy a significant place on the continuum of provision for pupils with SEND, on accepted consensus that, for some children, education in a more specialised setting may be needed (DE, 2015). Simultaneously, remodelling of the public sector workforce aimed to reduce the workload of teachers and £350 million was allocated towards classroom assistance, leading to a three-fold increase in numbers between 1997 and 2010 (Blatchford et al., 2012). Estimates of the number of classroom assistants across the UK is difficult as there is no standardised job title across all regions. Recent data indicated approximately 265 000 Teaching Assistants (TA) were employed across school types in England (DfE, 2019); of these, approximately 13 000 are in special schools. In Northern Ireland, approximately 12 000 are employed across all school types; of these, approximately 2000 are located in thirty-nine special schools. It is more even more difficult to establish accurate information on the numbers of health assistants employed in schools; this is largely due to the employer-led nature of the role and similar variations in job titles across areas and schools.

Research has classified the influence and impact of assistants from a range of perspectives: systemically as a policy response; institutionally as a factor of school provision; professionally as a co-worker with, or subordinate to, teaching staff; and individually as a process of self-reflection (Brown and Stanton-Chapman, 2014; Webster et al., 2010). Collectively, it strongly suggests a workforce in a state of flux whose acquisition of knowledge, responsibility and autonomy are more likely to

shaped by others than by their own design. Although a welcome and timely addition to the school workforce, delineating the precise roles and responsibilities of Classroom Assistants, has been a continuous challenge, due to the wide-ranging nature of their work and uncertain contractual arrangements such as not being paid for the long summer vacation (Harris and Aprile, 2015). The problem is not confined to education – assistants in both education and health fields have reported uncertainty and frustration regarding their respective roles, describing a work environment where lack of clarity and overlap in roles has resulted in a confused identity and a pattern of deployment that sits uneasily within their prescribed remit (Cockroft and Atkinson, 2015). Traditionally, job descriptions emphasised a predominantly caring role; over time, the language has morphed into criteria of mixed responsibilities, combining therapeutic and medical duties alongside a plethora of behaviour management, administrative and instructive tasks (Sharma and Salend, 2016). The evolution of a stratified workforce reveals an increasingly versatile habitus with a growing social and cultural capital – increasing numbers of assistants now hold an array of specialised credentials as well as higher (including third level) qualifications, with some choosing to pursue career progression (for example, Higher-Level Teaching Assistants in England) or to train for qualified teacher status. It is also clear, however, that the continued blurring of their professional parameters can generate a contradictory habitus and competing capitals that have a significant influence on assistants' and teachers' perceptions of themselves and each other.

Methodology, data collection and analysis

This paper draws on research conducted during 2017. Research on classroom assistants in Northern Ireland is, thus far, limited to a few small-scale studies, creating a significant knowledge gap that spans both mainstream and special school provision. The assistant workforce in special schools is more diverse, reflecting the educational and health profile of pupils, and so offered a good base from which to develop the study. A qualitative research design comprising comparable focus groups was deemed the most appropriate method of data collection. As an under-represented school population in Northern Ireland, the merit of a focus group approach was carefully considered – for a workforce unaccustomed to having voice on their position in the school system, individual interviews could be an intimidating experience; whereas, the flexible focus group design facilitated shared dialogue in the company and security of peers (Parahoo, 2014). Using the Department of Education (DE) list of special schools, a purposive sampling approach was used to identify eight special schools with a mixed assistant workforce. Prior to beginning field work, one school withdrew from the study and it was not possible to recruit another school during the time available. Due to an absence of centralised information on assistant employees, details of the research had

to be circulated in the first instance via the Principal in each of the seven participating schools with a request to circulate details of the study to all assistants. The information letter outlined the purpose of the research, the nature of assistant involvement, the voluntary nature of participation, the timeframe for data collection and measures taken by the researchers to ensure confidentiality at all times. From the initial sampling frame, a total of 47 assistants, encompassing classroom assistants and health assistants, agreed to participate; each assistant signed a consent form in the presence of a research prior to the interview. Full ethical approval was obtained from [affiliated University] in accordance with institutional best practice prior to data collection.

All focus groups were conducted on the premises of the participating schools and were arranged to facilitate the working arrangements of the assistants. Each focus group lasted between 40–60 minutes and, with participants' permission, were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and supplemented with field notes. An interpretivist approach to data analysis was adopted, recognising that the social world of these assistants is socially constructed in terms of how they engaged with and interpreted it. Analysis adhered to the principles of Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. Although the flexibility of this approach enabled '*searching across a data set . . . to find repeated patterns of meaning*' (ibid, p. 86), analysis at this level can overlook some nuance of detail. To address this, measures to ensure trustworthiness of the procedure were implemented (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). After identifying initial codes in the dataset, related codes were grouped together and sorted under potential themes. Final themes were agreed upon by all members of the research team, ensuring that they both accurately reflected the coded transcripts and were relevant to the intended aims of the study. These themes are explored in the following paragraphs, using compelling examples of quotations to illuminate findings. Information collected from the demographic profile of assistants was quantified on an Excel spreadsheet. Overall credibility was assured by the triangulation of data sources (health and education assistants) across a number of special school settings, helping to increase variety of perspectives. Transferability was assured by dense description of the research analysis and findings and the inclusion of quotations in the findings.

The characteristics of the 47 assistants who participated are illustrated in Table 1. This profile broadly replicates the education-health assistant ratio in special schools, where the constant presence of the CA is complemented by a range of peripatetic therapeutic support. Within the participating schools, the proportion of CAs to teachers averaged 3-1, a ratio that is both indicative of workforce reform and the increasing complexity of children's needs.

Table 1: Characteristics of assistants

Role	
Classroom Assistant	38
Speech and Language Therapy Assistant	2
Physiotherapy Assistant	2
Behavioural Outreach Assistant	2
Sensory Assistant	2
Health and Learning Assistant	1
Gender	
Female	39
Male	8
Experience	
1–5 years	6
6–10 years	6
11–14 years	10
15+ years	17
Highest qualification	
NVQ Level 3 Early Years Child Care	10
NVQ Level 3 Child Development	2
NVQ Level 3 Early Years Care and Education	2
NVQ Level 2 Early Years Child Care	2
Certificate in Child Care	2
NVQ2 Nursery Nursing	1
BSc Hons Language and Linguistics	1
BTEC National Diploma in Childcare	1
BA Hons Maths	1
BSc Hons Communication Studies	1
NNEB Diploma in Nursery Nursing	1
NVQ Level 3 Health and Social Care	1
Higher Certificate in Autistic Spectrum Disorder	1
BA Early Years Education	1
National Nursing Examination Board Certificate	1
AVCE Health and Social Care	1
HNC in Working with Children and Families	1
Preliminary Certificate in Social Care	1

Findings

The evolving habitus of the assistant

Overall findings indicated the habitus of the assistant in the special school field has acquired distinct porous boundaries, reflecting the changing characteristics of this school setting. Such interplay has the potential to re-create a *site of struggle*, and emerging from this study was a pattern suggesting that, whilst assistants had a very clear perception of their role, they were equally aware that their conventional, established habitus had been disrupted due to its increasing intersection with the habitus of teachers and assistant counterparts. In this respect, the following findings are suggestive of an embryonic habitus that has

evolved as much from necessity as from recognition of assistants' capital in the hierarchy of the school.

The conventional habitus

In initial descriptions of their duties, Classroom Assistants' most immediate responses were phrased around the parameters of a conventional habitus that reflected the nurturing and caring remit commonly associated with the role:

I don't think you'd be doing your job if you couldn't interact and love working with the kids . . . sometimes you're even like a second mammy to them, they'll even call you mammy. (A5, FG6)

Although there's a class of maybe 8–9 children, each one is so different and how you work with each one is so different . . . I just love coming in and trying to sort of think outside the box so you can make each child comfortable in their classroom. (A3, FG3)

. . . it's wee things, like from a mummy point of view that's what I would find important. I know the work is important too and seeing them progress in other things but for me, even just the social side of it and stuff, I think it's lovely when they start making wee friends and they look out for each other and stuff. (A3, FG2)

These observations, however, were offset with the reported challenges of a changing school field. The ratio of pupils-assistants in special schools is proportionately higher than in the mainstream sector, creating intra-dependent hubs within and between classrooms; it was clear this proximity to other assistants had become increasingly important as the breadth and scale of duties pushed the boundaries of their conventional habitus:

There's a lot more of us now too than there was a few years ago and the kids are different . . . the team that we have work really well together. There's like four of us and we would be together and our whole thing is about nurturing but that is nurturing each other as well because it is so intense. (A4, FG2)

Because sometimes you don't even need to leave your classroom, sometimes it's just a wee look sometimes if you're out. . . you can kinda see 'oh she looks like she's struggling a wee bit'. And you might not be, but it's just a wee nod to show you're ok or 'yes that would be helpful. (A1, FG2)

All Classroom Assistants agreed they were a workforce in transition, and that the pace of this had escalated in recent years. The diversity of daily tasks – typically tending to pupils' personal needs, general cleaning and tidying and creating resources – affirmed the universality of their conventional habitus. Increasingly, however, the specialised requirements for individual pupils – including

fulfilling specific education, health and/or behaviour interventions, implementing individual learning targets or liaising with teachers, other assistants and parents – were perceived as symptomatic of a more disrupted habitus:

I feel it has changed a lot as well, like if you had have asked this question years ago . . . it was more you were a CA and you supported their learning, you, you know, got to spend time with all the children and really make sure they understood what they were doing. Now a lot of the time you're spending time with 1 or 2 particular children to keep all the children safe so it's not so much, sometimes I don't feel like I'm doing what my job role is. (A3, FG2)

Navigating a disrupted habitus

The scale and rate of changes in assistants' deployment required ongoing navigation of their habitus. For many Classroom Assistants, this adaptation was particularly visible in the treatment of pupils with complex medical needs; limited access to a regular school nurse had resulted in the expectation that assistants could, and would assume specific health-related duties, including manual handling, tube feeding, suction and dealing with seizures. The porous margins between education and health fields fuelled a disrupted sense of individual responsibility that jarred with the remit of their conventional habitus:

There's a lot of medicals within a lot of the classes too . . . we don't have a nurse so we are all trained with seizures . . . everybody is and needs it. (A1, FG1)

It can be life and death. Last year we had a child who started to choke, turned blue. The girls got the machine and did the suction and half way through, the machine failed, the machine shut down and failed. So, it was a matter of trailing the child out and beating the back of her to try and unblock the airways and you have the added thing of 'have you broken a bone?' . . . it's an awful lot of responsibility on the staff, a big responsibility. (A8, FG4)

The shifting habitus of the Classroom Assistant could, by default, lead to some disruption in the habitus of health assistants. Although a regular presence in special schools, health assistants' daily working arrangements are more fluid; they are generally employed by a Health Trust and work with pupils at set times across a number of schools. Their primary role is to provide a range of therapeutic support and their main communication is with their health line manager. Although health assistants occupied their own distinct habitus, there was some evidence that teachers overlooked the distinction with their classroom counterparts, grouping both in a common habitus that lead to professional tensions. Interestingly, unlike their classroom counterparts, health assistants were more likely to resist

attempts at disruption in their conventional habitus as one explained:

... if we had one of the support workers filling in for somebody, they're really only there for a medical need, not there for their education and it's very hard for the teacher to understand that they don't actually have to do anything else with any other child when it comes to education. And they do find that hard between outside play or classroom because the girls can refuse because it's not their role. (A10, FG7)

It is not clear if this resistance was due to health assistants' peripatetic presence in schools or to their employment conditions which are independent of the hierarchy of the school; however, how and why some assistant's habitus are more disrupted is a finding that merits further exploration.

Teacher–assistant habitus

The emerging contradictions within assistants' habitus cannot be separated from their day-to-day interaction with the class teacher. The power dynamics of this relationship have been a key determinant in the evolution of assistant habitus within the norms of classroom practice. Universally acknowledged as the leader in the classroom, descriptions of teachers' practice nonetheless revealed how a disrupted, hybrid habitus has emerged:

Sometimes in our room you'd be hard pushed to work out who is the teacher and who is the CA. (A2, FG1)

I think our role's pretty much, if you walked into a classroom you wouldn't know what the difference between a teacher and an assistant was, because we all muck in together. (A2, FG4)

You could walk into a classroom and if our staff are not wearing their t-shirts, sometimes you don't know who's the CA and who's the teacher also. (A7, FG4)

Whilst the notion of a quasi-blended habitus between assistants and teachers may be somewhat speculative in the hierarchy of power, it was clear that the unique demands of the special school created an environment for a necessarily fluid working relationship:

Like if we notice anything with the child that we think might work better it doesn't matter if it's CA or teacher we all say try that idea out, it's an equal thing. . . Like in our room the teacher wouldn't ask us to do anything that she's not willing to do, so we're all very much equal in that sense. (A4, FG1)

The impetus for this scenario was based on a range of factors: the proximity of assistants to the children they support provided a level of insight that teachers did not always have, and the changeable dynamics of a special

classroom meant that teamwork was a necessity rather than an option:

Yeah, he's really supportive and he'll take our views on board and he allows us to think outside the box, that's what's really important . . . he understands we have experiences in education and we will approach a kid differently than he will and he allows space for that and I think that's very important. (A2, FG2)

Assistant habitus and capital

The transition of assistants from a conventional to a more disrupted habitus in the special school field, arguably, has been shaped by the profile of this workforce whose increasingly eclectic skills base has prompted a supply and demand culture often at variance with the origins of the post. Although assistants now represent a more professionally informed workforce, possessing social and cultural capital of stronger currency than previously held, their value more often than not is determined by the parameters of their conventional habitus and corresponding position in the hierarchy of the school. Yet, in this study, the juxtaposition of assistant and teacher habitus – between 'what is' and 'what could be' – suggests a similar confluence capital. Accepting habitus as a pliable entity, in turn, presumes malleability of the capitals within it, particularly when the efficacy of the special school field is reliant on the shared social and cultural capitals within it.

Assistants' social capital

Classroom assistants' awareness of their social capital is distinguished by the character of the special school, where they have a more ubiquitous presence than in the mainstream sector. Their social capital is reinforced by a staff ratio where, typically, 3–4 assistants working with one teacher underlined their contribution in managing the complex and diverse needs of pupils. In these conditions, their social capital was most evident in direct and sustained interaction with pupils that provided instructive insights to complement the practice of the class teacher:

I think if CAs weren't in this school, the school couldn't run and I don't mean that to sound big headed but I just – the teacher couldn't do the job on their own, you know, the children are too complex now. (A5, FG6)

If the teachers are off and you're getting a sub in, you do feel it. Our teachers appreciate that they know they can leave you, you totally know what's going on, especially when children are in with their medical needs. Not everyone is trained to tube feed or deal with seizures and stuff. You really do feel you're appreciated in that sense. (A5, FG2)

Assistants' description of their working relationship with teachers suggested a classroom culture that synthesised

the social capital of both parties. Whilst necessary reliance on multiple assistants to accommodate pupils' needs compelled a shared capital that might not be as visible in other school settings, the practice itself was indicative of transferable possibilities:

We're all very hands-on in whatever we have to do ... it doesn't matter, it could be the teacher doing it or it could be us, if it's personal needs or not, it's whoever is free to do it. (A3, FG1)

Although Classroom Assistants were relatively confident in the value of their social capital, health assistants were less so. It is not clear if this was due to misperceptions by teachers in the duties of a health assistant in school and the example cited took place in a mainstream setting; however, the ambiguity within the habitus and capital of education and health assistants is a dimension of the research that merits further investigation:

I mean in here's great but some of the outreach schools, the mainstream schools they just, they put you in that kind of CA kind of bubble and my interpretation would be that they don't believe you know what you're doing or that you have anything to offer, um and therefore, those are the schools where the teachers sit on one side and the assistants sit on the other and that still happens. (A2, FG6)

Assistants' cultural capital

Supplementing their perceived social capital, many assistants described a burgeoning cultural capital. This was acquired initially through their qualifications – of the 47 assistants, five were educated to degree level whilst a further five held higher-level diplomas – and regularly supplemented with specialised training and professional development in areas including behaviour management, sign language, autism, speech and language skills and early years.

Classroom Assistants' confidence in their cultural capital revealed some subtle but important distinctions, notably when they believed it was stronger than that of newly qualified or substitute teachers who were unfamiliar with the dynamics of the classroom; these observations provided an important reminder that capital is not always immediately or automatically conferred to those occupying a perceptibly dominant habitus and its relative position can be interchangeable:

Some people notice the [substitute] teacher taking direction from an assistant ... I mean, all the bosses past and present have told us that's what we should do, that we should step up and let the teacher know that this is how the day is going to go and would you mind doing a, b, c, d, whatever. (A2, FG4)

And they're not trained properly and then they don't always want to listen because it sounds as if you're telling them what to do and you're not – you're trying to give them a heads up, I probably would find sometimes that is hard to deal with. (A6, FG6)

It just seems a bit of a waste of money to bring people in who are going to be told what to do by CAs anyway. (A4, FG5)

For some, however, over-reliance on the traditional deployment practices of a conventional habitus – often decided on administrative need rather than expertise – risked negating the cultural capital they brought to the classroom:

What I think is really not great is whenever we get moved rooms and it's not to do with your skills base ... it's people just deciding where they need to put you and we have no authority over it ... if it's working well why change it, why not look at our skills base, why not interview us every year and say this is what I'm good at, this is where my passions are. (A2, FG2)

Further evidence on the acquisition, navigation and retention of cultural capital revealed an apparent imbalance between the professional currency of education and health. Health assistants, whose employment contracts were generally more consistent and secure, seemed to have the better option to enhance their cultural capital through automatic access to career progression that was not available to their classroom counterparts:

... when you get a promotion or whatever you move to a different band that then holds a different field of responsibility, so we're slightly different ... there's an opportunity to progress to a certain level if you wish. (A5, FG3)

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the habitus and capital of the assistant workforce in a select number of special schools in Northern Ireland and to consider how these have evolved within an ever-changing education field. Aligning this school population with Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital, has provided a distinctive lens to probe their networks, relationships and power ratio in the social order of the school and to critically review these relational to their status. The findings also need to be contextualised within the larger field of education, specifically provision for special education. Revised policy and legislation in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK have enacted new mandates on the 'how' and 'who' of special education, placing greater responsibility on school staff to provide appropriate support for pupils. This has taken place alongside economic reviews of support staff in mainstream schools; recent 'value for money'

audits have revealed year-on-year increases in expenditure on assistants but little evidence that this is the most effective type of support (NIAO, 2017). Although a recent review of special schools acknowledged the specialist skill of staff and endorsed shared expertise with the mainstream sector (DE, 2015), so far in Northern Ireland, there has been scant reference to the role or contribution of assistants within new legislative frameworks.

Similarly, whilst reviews of Classroom Assistants have taken place in other jurisdictions, none has taken place so far in Northern Ireland. In seeking to re-dress a core knowledge gap, this study confirms the ambiguity of the assistant role but also reveals a workforce whose habitus has been steadily disrupted by policy and institutional reform, requiring ongoing navigation of dispositions and negotiation of capital. Whilst this has undoubtedly contributed to assistant perceptions of a disrupted habitus, it is not a discouraging outcome because the findings also suggest an emergent re-formulated assistant habitus whose burgeoning capital has garnered enhanced social and cultural currency in the school field. The habitus occupied by the assistant workforce is defined by its own distinctive norms but, as this study reveals, there is clear potential for change. Other studies have illustrated the disruption that can occur when professional boundaries and working expectations exceed their original dimensions or when professional territoriality is threatened (Douglas et al., 2016; Radford et al., 2015). The inevitable individual or group desires to preserve the status quo of habitus is rooted in the social order of the education field that influences and shapes the status of those within it. Professional standards and associated pedagogical competencies determine the habitus of the teacher and define the capital they hold – to other staff, parents, pupils and to themselves. To have this habitus encroached upon can seem like a threat to the social order of the field and the capital of teachers. Whilst professional frameworks and governing bodies routinely oversee teachers' occupational responsibilities, there has been conspicuously less regulation of assistants (Nash, 2014). This has resulted in compromised employment arrangements, differentiated practices and ultimately strike action as assistants became increasingly frustrated with an increasingly unpredictable working environment. In contrast, the banded career progression identified by health assistants in this study revealed an incremental option that is not available to education assistants. Although the introduction of the Higher-Level Teaching Assistant was intended to create an equilibrium between teacher and assistant roles, the status it conferred has been nebulous and it is not an accessible career trajectory in all jurisdictions, including Northern Ireland.

Stagnation in access to, and flow of, appropriate forms of capital can perpetuate an asymmetric order and inhibit reflective socio-analysis of professional relations. Of significance, here is access to appropriate professional

development opportunities and career trajectories to enhance social cultural economic capital. Some training is offered to assistants and teachers but is neither mandatory nor fully funded and, as this study found, it can be a wasted resource if not accessed by relevant staff. In addition, the prevailing culture of individualistic training for teachers and assistants does not allow opportunities for collaborative professional development. Evidence from the education and health fields demonstrate how networks of personnel from different backgrounds and with different specialisms can coalesce in reciprocal habitus that enables flow of expertise (Logan et al., 2019; McDermott, 2017). In these circumstances, the additional cultural capital accrued by assistants should be seen in terms of what it adds to the resources of the school and the education of pupils rather than as a point of competition.

Increases in the numbers of children with SEND in mainstream and special schools mean that assistants will continue to be a necessary component of a diverse workforce. Applying Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital, this paper has provided compelling evidence on how the power held by assistants informed and influenced their position within schools. Adopting this innovative approach, it has offered fresh insights into assistants in special schools in NI. These dispositions have been sufficiently compromised in recent years to give rise to a diminished status. Yet, as this study strongly indicates, the evolution of the assistant habitus in special schools can offer an alternative arena with more porous boundaries than previously held and greater opportunity for shared capital. Through its distinctive profile, the microcosm of the special school environment magnifies the intensity of the assistant–teacher relationship to reveal a more confluent network that can unite more than it disrupts.

Bourdieu's theoretical concepts and sociological outlook, particularly their application to educational research, offered a philosophical and empirical interpretation of assistants' evolving role within special schools, deepening understanding of the blurred professional boundaries within the classroom and the power relations between staff who occupy this space. Whilst there is some criticism that Bourdieu's theories are used simply as a lens to view data rather than to inform research design (Reay, 2004), the interpretive approach taken in this study aligns with his conceptualisations of identity, culture and social relationships (Murphy, 2013). In sociology of education research, it is common for a study to focus solely on capital or habitus, or a combination of each, to explain or investigate a phenomenon. A strength of this study is that it disentangles capital and habitus and argues that, when explored alongside the concept of field, there is significant explanatory potential for the role of assistants in the hierarchy of the classroom. More specifically, Bourdieu's triad of concepts have not yet been applied to research involving Classroom Assistants in Northern Ireland.

These findings, therefore, provide a basis for fresh consideration of the classroom assistant role in special schools, and makes a compelling case that research should be underpinned by Bourdieu's concepts as outlined in this paper.

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