Abstract

Children with special educational needs (SEN) are less well accepted and integrated in comparison to their typically developing classmates. Trainings aimed at strengthening the social participation of SEN children focus on the child with SEN and thus accept the risk of stigmatization. We developed an intervention that focuses on the class as a whole, expecting that individual participation should increase in line with class cohesion. We present the intervention and its theoretical foundation – in particular an elaborated four facets model of cohesion. We report first results from an intervention study with 1065 students showing only small numerical changes in cohesion in both control and experimental group. We discuss possible explanations and give hints for further research in this field.

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Promoting Cohesion in (Inclusive) German Primary School Classes
First Results of an Intervention Study

Theoretical Background

Inclusion

- Aim of inclusion: social participation of all children especially those with special educational needs (SEN)
- Social participation in class = work together and experience positive relations with peers
- Inclusive setting itself not sufficient to ensure social participation for all children (e.g. Huber, 2008)
- Strong differences in quality of inclusion between classes (e.g. Krull et al., 2014)
- Individual social participation succeeds better in cohesive classrooms (Schürer, 2019)

Cohesion

- „the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and / or for the satisfaction of member affective needs“ (Carron et al., 1998, S. 213)
- The combination of two perspectives (How much is the individual attracted to the group? vs. How well are the group members interconnected?) and two domains (social relations vs. group tasks / aims) results in four facets of cohesion
- No elaborated concept of cohesion in school research so far → We transferred the concept and developed a standardized questionnaire

	Social (being together with classmates)	Task (learning & working together)
Attraction to the Group	**Attractive classmates** and thereby desire for common activities in breaks and leisure time	**Attractive group tasks** and thereby desire for participation in activities during lessons
Group Integration	**Perception of similarity and connectedness** in relation to social extracurricular activities	**Perception of similarity and connectedness** in relation to task-related learning activities

Team Building

- Method „to promote a greater sense of unity and cohesiveness, and to enable the team to function together more smoothly and effectively“ (Newman, 1984, S. 27).
- Five aspects of a team building measure (Carron & Spink, 1993)
  (1) emphasize the group's distinctiveness
  (2) establish group norms
  (3) strengthen the individual's position and connectedness
  (4) foster structured communication / interaction
  (5) claim personal sacrifices in the service of the group

The Intervention „Strong Class“ (Starke Klasse)

Aims

Promote cohesion in primary school classes with an intervention at group level
→ Increase social participation of all students (with and without SEN)
→ Avoid the risk of stigmatization

Implementation

- Further development of the Swiss “Sirius” intervention (Garrote & Dessemontet, 2015)
- Teachers received training and were familiarized with the different activities
- Default frequency for different types of activities, but free choice of specific arrangement
- Teachers implemented intervention within regular lessons

Activities in Dyads
weekly draw of pairs of pupils who act together during the week in…

… task-related activities
e.g. partner work in math,etc.

… social activities
e.g. get to know each other (fill in student profiles); class services (hand out notes, water flowers etc.)

+

Activities in Groups
whole class or small groups act together during the week in…

… task-related activities
e.g. cooperative group work in math, German etc.

… social activities
e.g. singing; cooperative games; tootling (Skinner et al. 2002)

Post-weekly feedback talk
How well could we learn and work together this week?
How well did we get along this week?

Participants

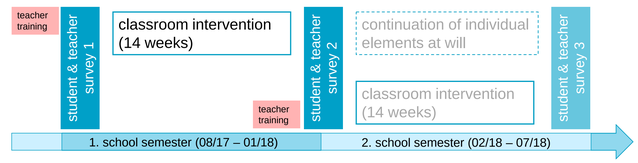
46 classes of grades 2 & 3 from 11 German primary schools
1065 students (52% female) aged 6 to 11 years (mean 7.6; sd = 0.74)

Children with…	Operationalization	Proportion
Migration Background	Non-German family language	47.7 %
Emotional and Behavioral Difficulties	Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire Teacher Version (Goodman, 1997) > 90th percentile in norm sample	10.9 %
Low School Achievement	DEMAT 1+/2+ German Test of Mathematical Performance (Krajewski et al., 2002; Krajewski et al., 2004) < 10th percentile in norm sample	23.0 %

Evaluation: Was Cohesion Promoted?

Design

experimental group
n = 25
waiting control group
n = 21

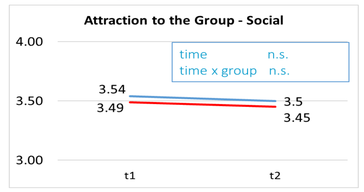


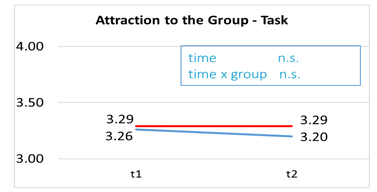
Instrument

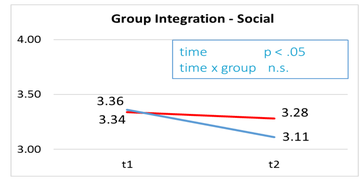
“GruKo4” (four facets of group cohesion; Schürer et al., 2017)

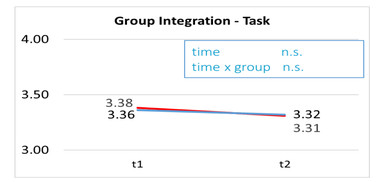
	Social (being together with classmates)	Task (learning & working together)
Attraction to the Group	**ATG_social**: I like the kids in my class. (5 Items; α = .875; m = 3.41; sd = 0.74)	**ATG_task:** I like the tasks during lessons. (5 Items; α = .774; m = 3.27; sd = 0.72)
Group Integration	**GI_social:** In my class, we all stick well together. (3 Items; α = .806; m = 3.26; sd = 0.81)	**GI_task:** My class is a really good learning community. (4 Items; α = .797; m = 3.29; sd = 0.76)

Results









Further Questions

Decrease of cohesion over time both in experimental and in waiting control group

- Was intervention properly implemented in all classes?
  → Check qualitative data from teacher interviews and intervention diaries
- Maybe higher sensitivity for group interactions after the intervention led to more critical evaluations of cohesion facets?
  → Check for more objective cohesion measures from sociometric data

Has social participation of SEN-children nevertheless been improved?
Maybe the intervention did not work on group but on individual level.

Literature

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