
Working with disabilities: What role do institutions and professionals play in disabled persons' experiences of labour market participation?

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Résumé

The inclusion of persons with disabilities in paid work and employment is an important human right proclaimed in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD). Article 27 (1) UN CRPD states that persons with disabilities have "the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work [...] in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible" (United Nations 2006). However, empirical data show that at the national level, in our case in Germany, disabled persons still face many problems with regard to their participation in work and employment (BMAS 2021).

Statistical data serve to provide an overall picture, but cannot answer the question of how labour market inclusion is experienced at the individual level and how it effects biographical experiences of disabled persons. To explore these questions, we draw on empirical material from a current research project entitled "Dispositifs of 'Dis/ability' in Transformation: (employed) work as biographical experience and everyday practice in the context of dis/ability", funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and conducted at the University of Cologne (Waldschmidt et al. 2020). Based on guided biographical interviews our study examines the role played by bureaucratic institutions, such as public authorities (eg. the Arbeitsagentur), and professional staff, such as teachers, for personal experiences of labour market inclusion and exclusion.

Our presentation of the interview material focuses on two aspects. *First*, we ask which institutions and professionals are mentioned in the biographical narratives and how. *Second*, we shed light on their role in relation to labour market participation. Our analyses show that institutions are described rather vaguely in some narratives and are presented as impersonal entities. Our interview partner also report that institutions tend to neglect or ignore the impairment-specific needs of their clients.

In contrast, there are individual professionals who appear in the narratives as 'real persons' and are portrayed in a more nuanced way than the general experiences with institutions. There are both negative and positive experiences: Some staff seem to belittle individual abilities of persons with disabilities by not trusting them in their skills. Other staff play a facilitating role in the biographies by supporting the abilities of disabled persons and their access to employment. Our findings underline that structural and institutional frameworks can support labour market inclusion, but that individual encouragement and support are also key factors in lived experiences of persons with disabilities.

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References

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