Stories of Surveillance and Resistance: Young People with Dwarfism and Teaching Assistants in Secondary Schools in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Teaching Assistants (TAs) are described as key figures in the inclusion of disabled young people in mainstream schools. However, disabled young people’s insights into TAs’ support remain limited. This paper contributes to such insights by exploring the experiences of young people with dwarfism in secondary education with their TAs in the United Kingdom, drawing on their qualitative, first-hand accounts. I engage in a Foucauldian analysis of TAs’ support, where I argue that, under the guise of support, disabled young people sustain TAs’ panoptic surveillance, aiming at their normalisation. Nevertheless, the stories reveal modes of surveillance that go beyond panopticicism, such as panauralism. Moreover, the stories demonstrate how young people resist to their surveillance by re-turning the gaze to their TAs, exercising the synoptic gaze. The paper concludes by considering the contributions of those stories, including the need to consider surveillance in relational terms, its multi-sensory nature, and its constitutive power.

Keywords
Introduction

Teaching Assistants (herein after referred to as TA s) constitute a major workforce in the United Kingdom, with their number increasing since 2010/11, from 221,500 to 281,100 (27%) (Department for Education 2023). One reason for such an increase is that they are viewed as key figures in the inclusion of disabled students in mainstream schools (Devecchi et al. 2012; Webster & De Boer 2019). Nevertheless, the extent to which TA s are facilitating (or hindering) the inclusion of disabled students has been debatable, with the literature focusing on TA s’ training, their deployment, and the types of support they offer (Giangreco 2021; Webster & De Boer 2021). Disabled children’s insights into TA s’ support also reveal their mixed feelings towards it, with such support being experienced occasionally as enabling and other times as disabling (Whitburn 2013).

This paper explores the experiences of fourteen young people (between the ages of eleven and thirty years old) with dwarfism, who were supported by a TA in their secondary education in the United Kingdom. Drawing on their first-hand accounts, this paper aims to illustrate how support both re-inscribes cultural beliefs about disability as a problem to be ‘managed’ and/or ‘fixed’ and institutional power over disabled young people (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012). To illustrate this, I draw on Foucault’s box of tools (1977: 205) and weave his discussion of surveillance, panopticism, and resistance into the participants’ stories. Allan (1996; 2008) notes how this box of tools is particularly useful in questioning dominant discourses e.g. biomedical, deficit, individualistic, of disability, and how these are materialised in schools. Meekosha and Shuttleworh (2009: 57) also argue that what makes Foucault’s ideas so useful to CDS is that they perform a radical de-familiarisation of modern institutions and practices as caring and benevolent and reveal technologies and procedures that classify, normalise, manage and control anomalous body-subjects.

1 I use the term Teaching Assistant consistently throughout this paper, even when referring to literature from different geopolitical contexts, which use terms such as paraprofessionals (Tews & Luppart 2008), teaching aides (Rutherford 2012) and teacher assistants (Egilson & Traustaddotir 2009).
2 Dwarfism is an impairment characterised by a stature of 4 feet and 10 inches (147 cm) or below and, often, by a disproportionate body size (Pritchard 2021a).
3 Critical Disability Studies.
4 ‘Anomalous’ here is used to describe bodies that are constructed as deviating from the ‘norm/al’.
This paper takes a similar stance to explore critically how the institutional support provided by TAs to disabled young people is not benevolent, but, under the guise of support, disabled students find themselves under adult surveillance, aiming at their normalisation (Foucault 1977).

Specifically, this paper examines how the young people with dwarfism experienced the TAs’ support as a form of surveillance, its repercussions, and how they attempted to resist to it. These stories indicate the knowledge disabled young people about the hierarchical power relations in schools, or, put differently, the biopolitics of schooling, that is, which bodies are valued and which ones are constructed as ‘disruptive’ and in need of normalisation. The young people’s stories also provide nuanced understandings of surveillance and resistance, which enrich Foucault’s discussion of those concepts and how these have been utilised in Critical Disability Studies (cf. Tremain 2015).

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, the paper contextualises the research by critically reviewing the literature around TAs and their role in inclusive education, and further considering disabled young people's insights into TAs support. Next, the research design is presented, including the methodology and the methods of data collection and analysis, recruitment and participants’ demographics, and the ethical dimensions of the research. I then go on to present and discuss participants’ stories, which are organised in three wider themes: a) stories of panoptic surveillance b) stories of panaural surveillance c) stories of synoptic surveillance. Theoretical concepts, such as surveillance, panopticism, panauralism, synopticon, are first introduced and then weaved into the analysis of these stories. Finally, the contributions of this paper are considered.

**Teaching Assistants and Inclusive Education**

TAs have been discussed as key figures in the inclusion of disabled students in mainstream schools (Devecchi et al. 2012; Webster & De Boer 2019). As Webster and de Boer (2021: 164) propose, ‘In many schools and classrooms across the globe, inclusion has become ostensibly contingent on the creation and utilisation of a relatively new type of educator: the TA. TAs have been described as the ‘change agents’ (Jorgensen et al. 2006: 65) for inclusion and the ‘solution to inclusion’ (Rutherford 2012: 760) due to the positive impact reported they have on disabled students in various areas (Sharma & Salend 2016), such as their academic performance and social integration (Farrell et al. 2010).
Nevertheless, TAs have also been viewed as hindering the inclusion of disabled students, shifting the attention away from the structural inequalities and root issues disabled students deal with (Giangreco & Broer 2005; Rutherford 2012), and acting as ‘human resources to mind the disabled student’ (Slee 2007: 181). Whitburn (2013: 159) notes that ‘support personnel are deployed in a way that perpetuates the special education tradition in inclusive education.’ As Mortier et al. (2010: 553) propose, ‘these types of ‘solutions’, enacted when deeper changes seem harder to achieve, risk bringing too much closure and lead to recreating (new) forms of exclusion’. Such exclusionary practices are considered, for instance, in Holt et al.’s (2012) research with disabled students, where TAs moved the disabled child out of the classroom and in a separate space to run an intervention or when TAs were sitting next to the disabled child at a separate desk in the back of the classroom.

Disabled students’ insights into TAs’ roles also demonstrate how the latter sometimes hinder rather than facilitate the inclusion of the former (Whitburn 2013). Although Giancreco and Doyle (2007: 429) note that disabled students’ insights are ‘notably absent from research about teacher assistant supports’ in comparison to other stakeholders’ insights, such as teachers and TAs, there have been studies looking into how disabled students discuss the support they receive from TAs. Such research has involved disabled students with different impairments and took place in different countries.

Some recurring themes in the studies exploring disabled students’ insights are:

– The stigma of support: disabled young people feel stigmatised by the presence of a TA next to them, as they believe that it stresses their ‘difference’ from their peers.

– The threat to independency: disabled students report they want to do or to learn how to do things by themselves rather than having TAs helping them with everything.

– The lack of input by disabled young people themselves regarding the support offered to them: it is quite common among disabled young people to be left out of the decision-making process concerning the support provided to them.

5 Learning difficulties/intellectual disabilities (Broer et al. 2005; Tews and Lupart 2008), physical impairments (Hemmingsson et al. 2003; Egilson and Traustadottir 2009; Skar and Tamm 2001).

Furthermore, some researchers explored how disabled students perceive their TAs, introducing different typologies, and the implications that each role have on disabled students. For instance, Broer et al. (2005) distinguish between four roles of TAs – mother, friend, protector and primary teacher, and Skar and Tamm (2001) discuss TAs as ‘the replaceable assistant’, the assistant as mother/father, the professional assistant, the assistant as a friend, and the ideal assistant. Regarding the implications of each role, it is noted, for instance, how the ‘mother’ and ‘friend’ perception of a TA could have a negative effect on the relationship between disabled students and their peers (Broer et al. 2005; Skär & Tam 2001).

These perceptions also relate to the different deployment of TAs. For instance, there is the one-on-one model, with TAs working on a one-to-one basis with disabled students, which can result in the micro-exclusion of the students due to working separately to their peers (Giangreco 2012). The second model is the class support model, during which TAs work with different students based on the class teacher’s instructions (Butt 2016).

The literature on TAs and inclusion, however, has often focused on specific themes, such as their role, the types of support they offer, their benefits and drawbacks, their involvement with the inclusion of disabled students, their deployment, and their training, which Giangreco (2021: 279) describes as ‘status quo thinking’. This paper takes a difference stance towards TAs’ support, that is, how such support comes at the expense of disabled young people finding themselves under incessant, adult surveillance, with the hidden agenda of normalisation.

Methodology

The research explored the secondary schooling experiences of 19 young people (between the ages of eleven and thirty years old) with dwarfism in the United Kingdom, adopting a narrative, qualitative approach (Tamboukou 2013). In particular, participants were provided with a range of options of how they preferred to share their stories, including oral storytelling (narrative, semi-structured interviews, in person or online, one-to-one or small focus groups), visual storytelling (visual stories) and digital storytelling (email interviews and posts on a private weblog).

The presence and support from a TA was a theme that featured in their accounts. Out of the twenty young people, fourteen had a TA (see Table 1) and it is their stories that are analysed in this paper. The inclusion of teenage participants was important, as they could reflect on how they experienced
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<th>Name of participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Type of assistant</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Classroom assistant In person Focus Group/digital storytelling</td>
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<td>John</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Classroom Assistant In person Focus Group/digital storytelling</td>
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<td>Louise</td>
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<td>Rania</td>
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<td>Classroom Assistant In person Pair Interview</td>
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<td>Lynn</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Classroom Assistant In person Pair Interview</td>
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<td>George</td>
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<td>Classroom assistant Online Interview with Chaperone</td>
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<td>Angela</td>
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<td>Alice</td>
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<td>Classroom assistant Online Pair Interview</td>
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<td>Paul</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>One-to-one assistant Online One-to-One Interview</td>
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<td>Melrose</td>
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<td>One-to-one assistant In person One-to-one Interview</td>
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<td>Ryan</td>
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<td>One-to-one assistant Visual Story/Email Interview</td>
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<td>Nathan</td>
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<td>One-to-one assistant Email Interview</td>
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<td>Patricia</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>One-to-one assistant Online One-to-one Interview</td>
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7 All the names are pseudonyms.
the support they were getting while they were still in school, whereas older participants (eighteen-thirty years old) were able to provide retrospective narratives of what their experiences with their TAS were like from an adult perspective. It is noteworthy that the teenage participants reported they had classroom assistants compared to the majority of the adult participants who had one-to-one TAS, indicating a shift in TAS’ deployment. The differences between having a classroom assistant and a one-to-one TA are considered in the analysis of the stories.

Recruitment was mediated by a range of gatekeepers, such as administrators of various Facebook groups and charities, and parents of participants who were below the age of sixteen. The most effective recruitment method was my attendance to annual, in person meetings of one association for people with dwarfism. Unlike the online advertisement of my research on platforms such as Facebook (Pritchard 2021b), which resulted in few participants expressing interest in participating, the personal interaction with participants in a safe space led to the recruitment of the majority of participants. This is understandable, especially considering the cyberbullying and mockery people with dwarfism experience online by non-disabled people (Pritchard 2021b). Snowballing was another effective method of recruitment (Bryman 2015).

Ethical approval was granted by the University I did my doctoral research at. The ethical guidelines of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC 2015) and British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018) were followed. All adult participants provided informed consent after reading the relevant information sheet, and all teenagers consented to their participation after gaining their parents’ informed consent. Teenage participants were also reminded that, ultimately, it should be their decision and not their parents’ if they wanted to take part in the research (Skelton 2008). Furthermore, a chaperone -the mother- was always present during the interviews with teenage participants. It was the mothers of the teenage participants that had consented for their children’s participation in the research and, because this was our first in person or online encounter, they felt it was right to remain present during the interviews. Abbott (2012) also reflects on how parents of disabled young people were present in the interviews he had conducted and the implications of their presence e.g. what disabled young people chose to share (and what not) or how parents’ perspectives complimented the young people’s ones.

Additionally, the right to withdraw at any time was emphasised to all participants and anonymity was compulsory for the teenage participants and optional for the adult ones. Participants were also informed that I would strive
for secure confidentiality, although this might be compromised due to the fact that this is a specific impairment group where many people know each other due to the common spaces they share, such as hospitals and associations (Shakespeare et al. 2010).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed through a narrative thematic approach (Riessman 2005). This method was chosen since it allows for the identification of themes within and across the stories (Riessman 2005).

The analysis included the following stages:

– I started with reading and re-reading the stories multiple times to achieve what is referred as ‘familiarisation’ with the data (Braun & Clarke 2006). Such familiarisation had already started during the transcribing process.

– The familiarisation process was followed by manual colour-coding, that is searching codes within the stories and across the stories (e.g. teachers, teaching assistants), which were highlighted with different colours (e.g. yellow for teachers, green for teaching assistants etc).

– Colour-coding was succeeded by the identification of themes and sub-themes. For instance, using the term ‘teaching assistant’ as a code, I went through the participants’ stories and highlighted it (with green colour) whenever I came across it. Then, I read the full sentences (or paragraphs) within which this code had been encountered and started identifying common patterns in relation to when this code was used.

Findings and Discussion

The participants’ stories are discussed next, illustrating the surveillance they endured under the guise of support from their TAs, and their attempts to resist it. A Foucauldian analysis of these stories take place by weaving Foucault’s discussion of surveillance and resistance into them. Nevertheless, these stories also provide nuanced understandings of surveillance, which go beyond Foucault’s panoptic model of surveillance. The findings have been divided into three sections based on the ‘type’ of surveillance: a) stories of panoptic surveillance b) stories of panaural surveillance and c) stories of synoptic surveillance. Each section starts with an explanation of the key concept(s) that guide the analysis of the participants’ stories, which are presented and discussed next.
Stories of Panoptic Surveillance

In “Discipline and Punish: the Birth of a Prison”, Foucault (1977) describes schools as sites of surveillance, where a range of technologies are used to produce docile subjects. One of those technologies is panopticism. Panopticism consists of the internalisation of the sense that one is relentlessly watched (internalisation of the gaze), so that they behave in a specific manner (ibid). As Foucault (1977: 187) argues, ‘It is the fact of constantly being seen, of being always able to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection’.

The idea of panopticism derives from the Panopticon (introduced by Bentham), a prison designed in such a way so that inmates always feel that they are being watched. The purpose of the Panopticon is for their inmates to internalise the disciplinary gaze, even if surveillance is discontinuous, so that they self-govern their conduct accordingly. Rather than considering the Panopticon literally, Foucault (ibid: 205) suggests that it ‘must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men.’

The young people shared many stories of how they found themselves under the surveillance of their tasks in the panoptic classroom (Holt 2004). Such surveillance was in line with two of the institutional roles of tasks: firstly, to facilitate the teacher with behaviour management, especially managing ‘disruptive’ behaviour and, secondly, to keep students ‘on task’ (Wren 2017). The following two stories are illustrative of the first form of surveillance:

Rania: And then, yes, say if you are breaking a rule, like my school, they absolutely hate chewing gum, so say if I was like being sneaky, had some chewing gum in the lesson, ‘Rania, chewing gum’. It’s like: I don’t need you to tell me [...] You’re not saying that to anyone else, which is quite cliché. You’re just saying that to me, cause you’re here to watch me, when actually that’s not what you’re doing, that’s not what you’re here to do. This it like to do, anyway, that was very annoying in that sense.

17 years old, pair interview, classroom assistant

Patricia: So, because I had a member of staff sat next to me sometimes, and, I almost kind of felt like I couldn’t be, I don’t know, what you should be, like a little bit naughty and a little bit rebellious, you know what I mean. Kind of what you are meant to do at high school.

30 years old, one-to-one interview, one-to-one assistant
Both Rania and Patricia reflected on how they were expected to behave in certain ways when TASs were around. Rania was aware of the surveillance she was under - you’re here to watch me -, but she felt conflicted by it – that’s not what you’re here to do. Moreover, Rania indicated that she already knew the behaviour norms – I don’t need you to tell me -, but she felt she was being singled out, which she described as cliché, showing that it was something expected for the disabled student to be singled out. The (omni)presence of the TA, as it was an one-to-one TA, meant that Patricia could not engage in any sort of behaviour that would be understood as naughty or rebellious. Patricia was also conscious of the limits of how naughty or rebellious she could be, as indicated by her use of the expression a little bit. This a little bit highlights also Patricia’s struggle between resistance to TASs’ power and conformity to the rules (Douglas 2010).

According to Slater (2016: 1), the non-normativity of young people e.g. being rebellious (or acting rebelliously) is only permissible to young people fitting neatly into other culturally privileged positions. The non-normativity of those who do not fit into these positions, including disabled young people, leave them in much more precarious positions (Slater 2016). This was evident in the two stories above: Patricia needed to self-govern her non-normativity in terms of who she should be and who she could not be, and Rania was immediately singled out and corrected when she attempted to break the rules.

In both stories, participants were conscious that they were being watched and that they had to self-govern their conduct accordingly, that is to turn themselves into docile subjects. Their observation by their TASs was hierarchical, in terms of being coercive, since the participants could not do much to cease it.

TASs also paid close attention to the young people to ensure that they were always on task:

Rania: If I was like, as a student, as you do, if you were sat next to somebody you were getting on with and had a chat with him. And then, they will always say: Oh, what are you doing? Oh, ok. Oh, are you alright with that question? Are you alright with this? Are you alright with that? I am like: ‘Fine’. ‘Oh, come on, just get on’, like ‘Let’s get on with your work then.’

17 years old, pair interview, classroom assistant

Lynn: Yeah, it is annoying. Like I was talking inside about the same. Oh, you need to pick four teaspoons of sugar and she goes “Shush, Lynn, Lynn is just talking.” [...] She goes like: “Do your work”.

12 years old, pair interview, classroom assistant
Christine: I don’t talk too much if I am with my best friend. We giggle too much, we don’t talk too much, we just giggle. And we do our work. And then, they just tell us off, even though we were doing our work.

13 years old, one-to-one interview, classroom assistant

The TAS exercised their panoptic gaze and intervened when they thought that the young people were not focused on their work. What is common in these three stories is the persistence of TAS, who, even after being reassured by the young people that they were on task, insisted on the same course of action, reflecting the cultural mistrust towards young people, which is exacerbated towards those positioned as ‘at risk’ (Kelly 2001; Slater 2016). Similar feelings of irritation from disabled young people who were under TAS’ surveillance have been reported in other studies (Hemmingson et al. 2003; Mortier et al. 2010). Moreover, as noted by Rubie-Davies et al. (2010), TAS seemed to be more concentrated on task completion rather than learning, which was also evident in the above stories.

The stories of surveillance shared so far illustrate how TAS exercise panoptic surveillance on the young people in the classroom as part of their institutional role and with the purpose of producing the docile, self-governed subject. Nevertheless, surveillance extended to other spaces, such as playgrounds (Richards 2012) and dining rooms (Pike 2008). Holt (2004) considers how disabled young people find themselves under adult surveillance in different spaces in the panoptic school. ‘Outdoors’ surveillance (meaning outside and beyond the school classroom) was also brought up in the stories of some young people:

Patricia: Eh, yeah, she used to go for a coffee and then she kind of used to come and almost kind of find me sometimes. But again, she’d be quite good at kind of keeping her distance, so she just kind of stand almost in the background and just kind of make sure like, if I kind of say to her: ‘Oh, can you come here for a minute?’ And then she’d come and say like: ‘What was it that you need’ or whatever. So, em, so yeah, she was quite good at that really.

30 years old, one-to-one interview, one-to-one assistant

Lynn: Like at class, when I leave five minutes early, cause I wait for my friend and someone else and (giggles), teaching assistant goes: ‘Oh, I will wait out here for you.’ [...]She goes like ‘No, I’ll just wait.’ And then my friend comes out and she walks with us.

12 years old, pair interview, classroom assistant
Rania: And then like someone who like walks around with you after. So, like every so often when you go to your lessons: ‘Oh, where are you next?’ ‘I am over in the Science block. ‘Alright, I will walk with you.’

17 years old, pair interview, classroom assistant

The young people could not escape their TAs’ surveillance, who did not leave them out of their sight at any moment, indicating the hierarchical nature of surveillance. In Patricia’s story, this surveillance from a discreet distance made her feel quite safe, in terms of having immediate access to her TA in case she needed anything. However, it also indicated that panoptic surveillance could occur from a distance. On the other hand, Lynn and Rania did not appreciate being followed everywhere. Their stories show the institutional power ascribed to TAs permits them to exercise their panoptic gaze, as they did not have to ask the young people if they were alright with being followed everywhere.

**Stories of Panaural Surveillance**

Besides Foucault, various other scholars have adopted the ‘Panopticon’ as a metaphor to consider how surveillance occurs in schools and how everyone – teachers, TAs, students -get entangled in it (Azzarito 2009; Gallagher 2010). However, the dominance of the panopticon in examining surveillance has been understood as oppressive by various Surveillance Studies scholars (Haggerty 2006), who have proposed moving towards post-panoptic understandings of surveillance (Lyon 2006). An important critique of panopticism that is pertinent to this research is its ocularcentrism, that is the emphasis on vision and surveillance’s reduction to the gaze/being watched (Gallagher 2011). Gallagher (2010: 271) proposes that “dominant ocularcentric understandings of surveillance could be enlarged to encompass what might be termed ‘panauralism’”. Panauralism refers to aural surveillance exercised through the sense of hearing by being overheard (Gallagher 2011). The following stories illustrate how panauralism manifested in secondary schools.

The (omni)presence and proximity of the TA, as discussed by the young people, affected the content of the conversation they could have with their friends:

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8 The use of visual metaphors is intentional, as it demonstrates the ocularcentrism of surveillance.
9 It is worth noting that Gallagher (2010) further proposes that more attention should be paid to multi-sensorial surveillance, including other senses, such as smell, touch, and taste.
Louise: But if you have a TA, I don’t know about you, but if you have a TA people are like, it’s a bit weird (Mary: Yeah), cause they’ll be always with you and you just want to be with your friends. (John: yes) just to have a normal conversation.

16 years old, focus group, classroom assistant

John: If I am talking to my friend, I won’t be able to like, (Louise: say it) it’s different, yeah. But like, when I am sat next to a teacher with me, even if it’s in a classroom coming and checking on me, it’s like, I’d rather not have them there actually, cause I want to talk, like, yeah, I want to talk to my friend about something and it’s been more private. I don’t want teachers just there.

16 years old, focus group, classroom assistant

Louise, John and Mary reflected on how the TA’s presence impacted on what they could discuss with their friends. All three young people mentioned how they would prefer their TAs not to be next to or around them all the time, especially when they were with their friends, indicating the toll that panauralism could have on their friendships.

While John did not provide any examples of what he considered as a ‘private’ topic, Melrose and Patricia shared the following stories regarding potential topics that they would not like their TAs to be there for when discussed:

Melrose: And obviously, when you are in high school, you talk about different things. Like, you know, you start your period, puberty; you don’t want an older woman there while you’re talking about things like that. So yeah, that was, that was, that was difficult. (24 years old, one-to-one interview, one-to-one assistant)

Patricia: When you kind of like, I don’t know, if you like boys or whatever, and you wanna say: ‘I quite like him’ to your friend and, or your friend wants to say it to you or anything like that, yeah. Anything private that you kind of want to discuss almost you kind of don’t want them to listen, it feels like another person kind of there. I mean sometimes that was quite nice, cause she gave quite helpful advice, but then, other times it was just like I want this privacy kind of thing. (30 years old, one-to-one interview, one-to-one assistant)

Melrose and Patricia expressed their hesitation to discuss more private topics with their peers in front of their TAs, such as menstruation and intimate relationships. They described this aural surveillance as ‘difficult’ and as a form
of intrusion to their privacy respectively. Both Melrose and Patricia had one-to-one TASs, which intensified such surveillance. However, they had different perceptions regarding the age of the TAS and the impact it can have. For Melrose, the fact that her TA was an ‘older woman’ exacerbated her hesitancy to talk about topics such as menstruation. On the other hand, Patricia recognised certain positive aspects of having an adult TA, as she could also provide her with helpful tips.

What all of the above stories demonstrate is that the young people are conscious of this panaural surveillance and they have to self-govern/self-censor themselves in terms of what they could share with their friends. As Skar and Tamm (2001: 927) claim, disabled young people experience their relationship with their TASs as ‘an invasion of privacy’ and as asymmetrical, in terms of them sharing (or having to share) everything about themselves, without them knowing anything about their TASs.

Stories of Synoptic Surveillance

As Foucault (1978: 95) asserts, ‘where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.’ Against the danger of portraying the young people as passive recipients of surveillance (Holt et al. 2012), the following stories explore the ways and the means that the young people used to resist such surveillance and the potential outcomes (or lack of) of such resistance. Prior to presenting the stories though, I consider how Foucault understood resistance, which I suggest aligns with a Critical Disability Studies consideration of resistance (Gabel and Peter 2004), and the necessary shift from panoptic to synoptic surveillance.

Foucault (1981: 95) argues that

[We find] a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. But this does not mean that they are only a reaction or a rebound, forming with respect to the basic

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10 According to data from the Department for Education (2023), TASs tend to be female and above the age of 40 years old.
domination an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat.

This openness to what can be understood as resistance is in line with Gabels’ and Peters’ (2004: 596) engagement with resistance theory, which ‘allows disability studies to acknowledge the importance of all forms of resistance by disabled people’. This is particularly important in the case of disabled children and young people, who are often constructed as ‘passive’ and ‘immature’ subjects (Davis & Watson 2002). However, my aim here is not to think of resistance as the ‘panacea’ to the ableist ideologies perpetuated in TAs’ practices (Giangreco 2021), but to use resistance as a concept to shed light on the existing power relations at schools and to indicate young people’s knowledge of such power structures and the ways they negotiate them.

Moreover, a turn to resistance means a shift from the panopticon to the synopticon. The notion of the synoptic, as discussed by Mathiesen (1997), is a reversal of the panopticon: while the panopticon assumes that the few see the many e.g., the guardians watch the prisoners in the Panopticon, the synopticon assumes that the many see the few. Landhal (2013) applies the idea of the synoptic in the context of a classroom, where the teachers are also visible and exposed to the students’ gaze. This reversal of the gaze, Landhal argues, is what opens space for resistance. The following stories illustrate how the young people exercised their synoptic gaze or how they re-turned the gaze to their TAs, and the outcomes of such resistance.

Rania and Lynn were among the most outspoken young people regarding resistance and, hence, many of the stories following below are theirs. This resistant attitude could be partly attributed to the background of their families, who are active members of the organisations that I have worked with. Moreover, these two were interviewed together, so their stories were complimenting each other.

As argued earlier, the purpose of surveillance is the production of docile, self-governed bodies (Foucault 1977), which is in line with the institutional role of TAs (Blatchford et al. 2009). Both Rania and Lynn shared stories whereby they acted as ‘indocile’ subjects (Erevelles 2000) against their TAs’ surveillance:

Rania: Whenever I was just like working and say if I was like, as a student, as you do, if you were sat next to somebody you were getting on with and had a chat with him and then, they will always say, and then they will always ‘Oh, what are you doing? Oh, ok. Oh, are you alright with that question? Are you alright with this, are you alright with that?’ I am
like: ‘Fine.’ ‘Oh, come on, just get on’, like, ‘let’s get on with your work then.’ It’s like: ‘I am doing, please just leave me alone, I am fine.’

17 years old, pair interview, classroom assistant, added emphasis

Lynn: Yeah, it is annoying. Like I was talking inside about the same: ‘Oh, you need to pick four teaspoons of sugar’ and she goes: “Shush, Lynn, Lynn is just talking” and I am like: ‘Yeah, she’s talking to that group, not my group or to anyone.’ She goes like “Do your work”. I am like “I was, but you stopped me”. (Rania: Yeah). And then, like two minutes later, “Lynn, pack up, we’re going”. I am like “Seriously? And I was having fun.” She makes me stop lessons, like miss the good things (Rania: Yeah), cause she talks to me. Like I only did two minutes of that and I am supposed to do like five. ‘You made me miss three minutes of that, so that’s not nice or fun’.

12 years old, pair interview, classroom assistant, added emphasis

Instead of conforming with the TAs’ orders, Rania and Lynn spoke back to them and resisted their governance, re-turning the gaze to their TAs. Rania’s resistance built up gradually, from ‘fine’ to ‘please leave me alone’, and Lynn called out her TA for not adhering to the instructions they were given: ‘you made me miss three minutes’. However, in the case of disabled young people, resistance can lead to more surveillance and/or punishment, as they are constructed as the unruly subjects who need to be disciplined (Allan 2008; Erevelles 2000). For instance, Lynn was removed from the class – what could be seen as punishment from a Foucauldian perspective – for speaking out.

Whilst Lynn’s TA drew on the power assigned to her as a staff member to punish her, some young people also used the existent hierarchical power relations in schools, which distinguished between the class teacher and TAs, as a means of resistance:

Rania: And like it’s like you’ve got a second teacher just on your case. And it’s like, if teachers say that I am chatting with my friend, we are chatting about French, she or we chat about languages, she’s French. I am asking her about how do you learn a second language when you are in a German class. And I am like, you know, I am trying to get on with my German, just chatting about languages. And it’s like: ‘Stop with that, get on with your work.’ And I am like, ‘You’re not, you aren’t the teacher, and you’re

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11 The added emphasis indicates the act of resistance. It is worth clarifying that this quote has been used previously (p. 9), but this time the focus is on resistance.
not here to help me with my learning. You are just here to help me, to support me if I got a problem with my back or with my legs or anything like that.

17 years old, pair interview, classroom assistant, added emphasis

In this story, Rania first demonstrated her awareness and irritation for being under the TA’s constant surveillance, who she described as a ‘second teacher’. In her attempt to resist to the governance of her conduct by her TA, she made it clear to them that their responsibilities differed from the ones of a class teacher, with the latter being responsible for her learning and the former for physical support. As various studies have shown, young people are cognisant of the different roles between TAs and class teachers and their status in schools (Eyres et al. 2004; Fraser & Meadows 2008). Moreover, in line with the Foucauldian analysis, this story indicates the circular structure of power, meaning that power is not one’s possession, but all individuals are caught up in hierarchical power relations (Foucault 1982). By exercising her synoptic gaze, Rania showed that TAs enact surveillance whilst also finding themselves under surveillance (Lehane 2016; Mansaray 2006). Foucault (1977) also proposes that the Panopticon is structured in such a way that those who exercise surveillance are also exposed to surveillance.

Furthermore, the resistance in the above stories was against the subjectification of the young people based on fixed notions about their impairment (Davis & Watson 2002). Such resistance manifested in Rania’s story:

Rania: And then, often I think, because you’re small, there's always with lots of people, and this is gonna sound quite generalizing, but to be fair, it is with older people, which in my case my TA, the TAs that were shared were, they were generally older, near retiring age. There's always this like patronizing nature, cause they see like you're small. They 'll always see like, oh, like, like you got a younger mind, when actually with that definitely isn't the case with me. I am 17, at the age of 11 I passed a test to get to a grammar school. I was in the top 5% of my area, I am very capable. I am like, I am intelligent and I am fair and I am capable like looking after myself and doing my work, which a lot of them didn't like see, and it was annoying. So, when you got like a TA to help you with your bags or make sure you are ok with your back, I don't want them to try to help me with my work, I am very fine with my work, thanks.

17 years old, pair interview, classroom assistant
Rania’s story illustrates her resistance towards the TAs’ surveillance that see her and hear her in specific ways, such as ‘small’ and with a ‘younger mind’. Not only does Rania resist the gaze that aims to discipline her (the disciplinary gaze), but she also resists the gaze that sees her as small (the constitutive/subjectifying gaze). The constitutive gaze is not a neutral gaze, but a gaze which draws on cultural understandings of disability and smallness that are degrading and infantilising.

Against her subjectification as small and with a younger mind, Rania framed her resistance drawing on the ableist register, meaning that her claims of capability built on discourses of able-mindness (Kafer 2013) that are valued in schools, such as performing well in exams and achieving high scores that rank you among the top students. This indicates the struggle between resistance and conformity, meaning that the resistance against the subjectification as ‘small’ and its cultural implications e.g. of little importance, relied on the level of conformity with schools’ ableist standards and expectations respectively, such as performing high in tests and being an independent learner (Karmiris 2020). However, such resistance proved to be futile, since TAs “didn’t like see and it was annoying”, indicating the power of the constitutive gaze that refuses to see the subject otherwise.

Finally, Rania acknowledged that most often it was older TAs that held such patronising attitudes towards her, indicating the ageist (adult/young person), dis/ableist (non-disabled/disabled, big/small) power relations in place.

**Conclusions**

Rather than taking for granted that TAs’ support always serves benevolent purposes and enables the inclusion of disabled students in mainstream schools, this paper focused on how such support also serves other ‘hidden’ agendas, such as the surveillance and normalisation of disabled students. Furthermore, TAs support re-inscribed cultural beliefs about disability e.g. as a problem to be managed and/or fixed, legitimating the institutional (schools’) power over disabled young people.

Specifically, the stories presented and discussed earlier have indicated how disabled young people find themselves under their TAs’ constant surveillance, with the aim of the production of the docile, self-governed subject. Such surveillance takes place not only in the panoptic class, but extends to other spaces, such as the playground. Moreover, these stories have illustrated the multi-sensory nature of surveillance, that is, how surveillance was exercised through panopticism (panoptic surveillance) and panauralism.
(aural surveillance). This has been one of the original contributions of this paper, with participants’ stories illustrating that other modes of surveillance -beyond panopticism- are also exercised in schools, and their effects should be considered.

Furthermore, the stories have demonstrated that disabled young people are not passive towards their surveillance, but they develop a range of resisting practices to the governance of their bodies and their conduct, such as the synoptic gaze. Their stories highlighted the relationality of surveillance, that is, those who find themselves under surveillance -on this occasion, disabled young people- also position those who surveil them -on this occasion, TAs- under surveillance. However, such relational surveillance is not devoid of institutional power relations. For instance, the disabled young people's resistance through the exercise of the synoptic gaze is either dismissed or it can even result in their punishment as a means of discipline due to the institutional power ascribed to TAs. This is another original contribution of this paper, which calls for more attention to be paid on how surveillance is exercised relationally and is always embedded in power relations.

Moreover, it has been shown that TAs’ panoptic (and panaural) gaze is a constitutive/subjectifying gaze that sees (and hears) disabled young people in specific ways e.g. as disabled and as small, within a culture with degrading concepts of disability and smallness. Even when this gaze is defied, it still manages to interpellate subjects into fixed positions.

Before concluding, I need to make an important clarification. Similar to Giangreco (2021: 279), ‘I am not calling for the elimination of, or even necessarily the reduction of, TAs in schools’. The aim of this paper is not to hold specific individual TAs accountable for ‘bad’ practice or to undervalue TAs’ labour and its importance. TAs’ support can bring about important benefits and can be enabling (Whitburn 2013). Moreover, the economic cuts on disabled children and young people (Hunter et al. 2020) have already widened the inequalities experienced between disabled and non-disabled children and young people in education. What I am arguing, however, is that that the institutional support offered by TAs to disabled young people, in its current form and in the context of a neoliberal ableist education (Goodley 2014), aims at their surveillance and normalisation. Nevertheless, if support is to be meaningful and enabling, disabled young people should be involved in the decisions of what support they need and how this could be provided, rather than specific types of support being imposed on them. Two criteria that McLaughlin (2020: 410–411) proposes in relation to support are: ‘(1) it should not reduce the agency of disabled people to have a vital say in what they receive; (2) support is more likely to be caring in its responsiveness when those receiving and providing it are recognised as
actors of value.’ These criteria should also apply to the support provided by TAs to disabled young people.

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