

Excluded voices in inclusive child and youth welfare services

„Ausgeschlossene“ Stimmen in der inklusiven Kinder- und Jugendhilfe

Alexandra Klein, Stephanie Langer and Amina Kaddour-Dugonjic

Institute of Education, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Mainz, Germany

ABSTRACT

The voices of social work service users in Germany are getting increasingly prominent. The recent developments in the Child and Youth Welfare Act (SGB VIII) illustrate that participation, self-organisation, and self-representation rights are receiving heightened attention.

Simultaneously, questions regarding the requirements, conditions, and possibilities of self-organisation have received relatively minuscule attention so far. Who has the means and opportunities for self-organisation under which conditions? How are social closure processes of significance? What consequences does it have for service users? What insights can we gain at the intersection of social work and special education?

In this article, we seek to explore these questions. Initially, we take a journey through history, shedding light on the question of the virulence of social closure and usurpation processes within user movements.

Based on this historical recapitulatory overview and repositories of paradigms and theories on social inequality, we take a look at current transformations in the voices of service users within the social services system. Through interviews with self-advocates in child and youth welfare and disability assistance services, and the analysis of official documents from self-advocacy organisations, we illustrate the capacity for a redirection of attention on the voices of service users guided by closure theory.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Stimmen der Adressat*innen sozialer Dienste in Deutschland werden immer lauter. Die jüngsten Entwicklungen im Kinder- und Jugendhilfegesetz (SGB VIII) zeigen, dass Partizipations-, Selbstorganisations- und Selbstvertretungsrechte verstärkt in den Blick genommen werden.

Gleichzeitig sind Fragen nach den Voraussetzungen, Bedingungen und Möglichkeiten der Selbstorganisation bisher relativ wenig berücksichtigt worden. Wer hat unter welchen Bedingungen die Mittel und Möglichkeiten zur Selbstorganisation? Welche Bedeutung haben soziale Schließungsprozesse? Welche Konsequenzen ergeben sich daraus für die

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 January 2024

Accepted 22 November 2024

KEYWORDS

Self-advocacy; child and youth welfare; voice; user movements; social closure

SCHLAGWÖRTER

Selbstvertretung; Kinder- und Jugendhilfe; Stimme; Nutzer*innenbewegung; soziale Schließung

Adressat*innen? Welche Erkenntnisse können wir an der Schnittstelle von Sozialer Arbeit und Sonderpädagogik gewinnen?

Diesen Fragen wollen wir in diesem Beitrag nachgehen. Zunächst unternehmen wir einen Streifzug durch die Geschichte und beleuchten die Frage nach der Virulenz von sozialen Schließungs- und Usurpationsprozessen innerhalb von Nutzer*innenbewegungen.

Basierend auf diesem historischen Rückblick und der Auswahl von Paradigmen und Theorien zu sozialer Ungleichheit werfen wir einen Blick auf die aktuellen Transformationen der Stimme von Adressat*innen innerhalb des Hilfesystems.

Anhand von Interviews mit Selbstvertreter*innen in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe und der Behindertenhilfe sowie der Analyse offizieller Dokumente von Selbstvertretungsorganisationen illustrieren wir die Möglichkeit einer Neujustierung der Aufmerksamkeit auf die Stimmen von Adressat*innen, die sich an der Schließungstheorie orientiert.

In our article, we dedicate ourselves to the voices of service users particularly in the Child and Youth Welfare Services. Why is there a need for such a contribution? In Germany the attention for the voice of welfare recipients has increased significantly in science, practice and politics since the early 2000s. The central ideas of publications like Bitzan et al. (2006) on the voices of recipients, which since has become a classic of academic social pedagogy in Germany, and the more recent and explicitly socio-pedagogical user research by Oelerich and Schaarschuch (2005) can be summarised as follows: Emphasising the perspective of the users should and can establish a critical counterbalance to expertocracy and institutions. The voice of the users has also received a new form of attention at the legislative level. The strengthening of users' opportunities to exert influence is seen as a relevant achievement of the current reform of the Child and Youth Services Act in Germany (SGB VIII), in which the previously separate responsibilities of child and youth services (SGB VIII) and integration assistance for children with disabilities (SGB IX) are to be merged into an inclusive solution¹ or overall responsibility of child and youth services by 2028. This so called 'inclusion reform' of child and youth welfare asserts the necessity to broaden rights to participation, self-organisation and self-representation, aiming to strengthen the influence of user's voices. Also, the adoption of the law itself was preceded by a multi-year, institutionalised participation and dialogue process, in which some pre-selected user (participation) organisations were involved (see also for critical aspect: Seyboldt 2021). At first glance, it seems to be a significant march through the institutions that has taken the voice of the user as a counterbalance.

Examining the disciplinary, professional, and political debate surrounding user voices in Germany more closely, one might notice that questions regarding prerequisites, scope, conditions, and possibilities of participation, self-organisation, and self-representation receive relatively little attention. Who possesses the resources and opportunities for such forms of participation, what conditions are required? What significance is attributed to social closure processes in this context? What are the implications for the voices of the users regarding this? What insights can we gain from this perspective regarding a historically, theoretically, and empirically informed analysis of inclusive child and youth welfare which, at the intersection of social and special education, can draw on diverse knowledge bases related to participation and self-organisation?

With precisely these questions, which, despite the current discourse, have not been sufficiently reflected upon, we will engage in this article. We will not conclusively answer them but rather embark on a brief journey through time. Given the rather tense relationship between social movements, special education, and social pedagogy, we shed light on the virulence of social closure and usurpation processes. By historical context and inequality theory we explore the ongoing transformations of service user voices within the support system. Through various examples, we illuminate the potential insights derived from a shift of focus informed by closure theory. Thus, we can identify some structures and processes that create excluded voices in inclusive child and youth welfare services.

Special education and self-advocacy, social pedagogy and participation

The establishment of special education as a pedagogical sub-discipline in Germany is inseparably linked to the voices of the service users, those affected, and the self-organisation of parents of children with disabilities, as well as the disability rights movement of the 1970s. Self – representation can be considered a driving force for participation, co-determination, and self – determination: Paradigm shifts in special education as well as the establishment of disability studies are significantly influenced by the demands and engagement of the emancipatory disability rights movement. The struggle for the recognition of disabled individuals as bearers of civil rights, the disempowerment of presumed professionals, and the acknowledgment of disability as a powerful societal and differentiating categorisation were led predominately by those affected themselves or by association (Pfahl & Köbsell, 2016).

At the same time, it is neither a single group nor a homogeneous grouping. Heterogeneous forms of self-representation can be identified, for example, based on the type of impairment – such as self-organisations for individuals with war-related disabilities, physical and sensory impairments, and learning difficulties. Moreover, it was particularly parents of disabled children who organised early on, articulated interests, demanded more appropriate forms of support, participation, and the reduction of access – and participation barriers – and, as Eckhardt Rohrmann puts it, they have ‘prevailed against the resistance of the mainstream of the discipline’ (Rohrmann, 2021, p. 181).

It is well reconstructed how the demands and concepts of the youth, women, and the working-class labour movements have influenced social pedagogical theory and practice since the beginning of the twentieth century (Lohrenscheit, 2023; Wagner, 2009). The self-organisation of parents of disabled children – in Germany especially the Lebenshilfe, founded in 1958 – illustrates how user involvement and the critique on paternalistic care are intertwined in social pedagogy by affected users actively involving themselves and thus gradually transforming definitions of social work (Stoll, 2014). Thereby, as argued by Stefan Schnurr (2018, p. 633), interpretations of social work that increasingly see their mandate towards service user as supporting them ‘in unfolding their autonomy as individuals and (...) participating in deciding which norms and rules should apply’ have become more impactful. Especially since the ‘dynamic 1970s’ in social pedagogy, a period of profound change and reform in the social and educational landscape, particularly in Germany, the introduction of the Social Code Book VIII (SGB VIII) in 1990/91 can be seen as a democratising milestone for child and youth welfare, often – admittedly somewhat simplistically – referred to as a paradigm shift from a law of intervention to a law of services (for an interesting review, see Wiesner, 2016). These interpretations also refer to a ‘professional understanding’ – that is, a more ‘democratically corrected’ understanding, oriented towards participation, involvement, and the inclusion of the user voices.

The self-positioning of social work and the ‘intervening professions’ as allies of social movements, as ‘fighters for social justice alongside social movements,’ however, prove to be untenable. Rather, the analysis of this ‘difficult and tension-filled relationship’ – as reconstructed by Wagner (2022, p. 13) – perpetually needs to inquire into the extent to which this collaboration results in a ‘pedagogizing and simultaneously depoliticizing shutdown of social conflicts.’ For example, individualising interpretations of problems and monologising interpretations of needs serve to ‘systematically name social conflicts out of existence’ (ibid.).

In participatory settings, significant discrepancies between the perceptions of professionals and service users can become apparent. The same applies to the actual opportunities to influence decisions. Variations of pseudo-participation and ‘participation traps’ are extensively documented across disciplines (e.g. Klingler, 2024; Plangger & Schönwiese, 2015). They draw attention to power asymmetries, unequal opportunities for articulation and influence among different stakeholder groups, as well as the political and institutional instrumentalization of their voices.

Who has the authority to define the needs of individuals and describe conflicts? Who possesses the power to provide justifications for the involvement of intervening professions? Who articulates and represents whose interests? These were central questions in the field of tension between the

self-help movements of the 1970s/80s, recently highlighted by the German journal 'Widersprüche' in several issues (see *Widersprüche* 2021, 2022). When we engage with the voices of recipients and their more or less institutionalised forms of representation, these questions prove to be as relevant as they are forward-looking.

Thus, it becomes evident that the endeavour for voice, representation, and participation is inherently linked to social struggles and conflicts, as well as inequalities and processes of exclusion.

Social closure and usurpation in the context of movement stories

According to Max Weber, the goal of closure processes is to keep the number of those competing for specific opportunities, goods, or resources low. To achieve this, Weber argues that 'closure of the relevant opportunities against outsiders must always be to some extent achieved' (Weber, 1922/1985, p. 201). Regardless of the community constituting itself as a special interest group in the closure process, the driving force behind it lies in the 'tendency to monopolize' (ibid.). Building on this, Parkin (1974) uses the term 'usurpation strategies' to describe the collective resistance of the excluded. The term 'closure equation' is used to conceptualise the struggle for closure and usurpation as a result of societal conflicts, where specific strategies are employed (Mackert, 2003). Closure strategies are aimed at stabilisation, while usurpation strategies focus on the reorganisation of the distribution structure of goods and resources. 'Dual closure' makes this visible even within different conflicting groups. The state plays a central role in closure conflicts, for example, through legal definitions, securing, and reformulating of claims and belonging (cf. Mackert, 2004, p. 13).

From a closure perspective, it is possible to shed light on conflict and differentiation lines within social movements, in self-organisation, and self-representations. Indeed, the question of who articulates and represents whose interests, who has a voice, and the means and opportunities to garner attention and influence is a historically well-probed question. This question can also prove valuable for analyzing the conditions and possibilities of user voices for a child and youth welfare service that aims to be inclusive.

Consider, for instance, the organisation of 'Krüppelfrauen' (disabled women) and the 'Weibernetz' (Women's Network), that can be understood as a result of social closures and usurpation. While women were less visible in the male-dominated disability movement of the 1970s, and initially, there was a lack of interest in gender issues within the movement, by the late 1970s, groups were increasingly formed. Their initial goal was to create spaces for exchanging unheard concerns of disabled women (cf. Ehrig, 1996, p. 297). The founding of the Women's Network, a national network of women, lesbians, and girls with disabilities, also emerged from these conflicts, the struggle for visibility, voice, and recognition. At the same time, Pfahl and Köbsell (2016, p. 72) state, that the described struggles were accompanied by an 'exclusion of non-German women and people with learning difficulties,' and the interests of 'women with psychiatric diagnoses as well as women of color' were largely ignored in the disability movement.

The virulence of inequality dimensions, closure and usurpation in the struggle for representation and self-advocacy can also be traced in women's rights movements. Critical debates and counter-narratives emerged from excluded women, who remained unnoticed in women's rights movement, that focused on the concerns of white, privileged women and largely ignored those of queer, of colour and/or working-class women (cf. Walgenbach, 2014, p. 55). These debates were significantly influenced by the works of pioneers in Black feminism such as Angela Davis, bell hooks and Audre Lord, who opened spaces for addressing the concerns of marginalised women. In 1974, they formed the Combahee River Collective of black, queer and socialist feminists and published a written statement in 1977, in which they bundled their critique of a women's movement oriented on white life realities (cf. Combahee River Collective, 1977/2014) and demanded the consideration of perspectives on intersectional exclusions and discrimination against women* of colour (see Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1981/2021; Haraway, 1991). In it, they stated that racism, sexism, classism and other forms of discrimination originate in societal power distribution processes and are interconnected systems of

domination and oppression (ibid. 271f.). The statement is based on the experiences of Black women, whose perspectives were not taken into account in either the women's rights movement or in the Black civil rights movement, both of which were dominated by white women or Black men. Similar debates on differences were simultaneously conducted in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). In this context, migrantized, Black, Jewish women*, and women* with disabilities were important catalysts for critiquing the German women's movement, that was oriented toward the white middle class. (Walgenbach, 2007, p. 27 et seqq.). Migrantized women in the FRG pointed out problems that explicitly affected women and yet were not addressed by the women's movement (cf. Aktaş, 1993; Kang, 1993). Furthermore, racialized women were thought of as a constitutive object of comparison, whose feminist consciousness and capacity for emancipation was measured on white feminist standards, a continuity that is still observable today in white feminism discourses such as the 'head scarf debate' (Otyakmaz, 1995; Opratko, 2019, p. 225). The shared experience of either not being represented in the feminist mainstream or being represented as 'unlike' due to the powerfully intertwined relationship of migration, racism, class, ability, and gender led to establishment of self-organisations where new speaking positions and representations for overlooked voices were formed. One such self-organisation is ADEFRA, a coalition of Black lesbian women that played a pioneering role in the formation and structuring of an organised Black community in the Federal Republic of Germany. It continues to advocate for the interests and concerns of Black women in Germany to this day. Similarities can be found with 'Proletarian lesbian groups' in the late 1980s, who organised to have an anti-classist influence on the women* and lesbian movements. In this context, devaluation, exclusion, anger, and shame were identified as shared experiences to which they were subjected in their political groups, often due to their (ascribed) class positions. 'Comparable to the Eurocentric and patriarchal world view that we criticized' – as Witte et al. (2013, p. 86) recapitulates this experience – 'another dominant culture operated right in the midst of us political (lesbian-feminist) autonomists, quasi-unnoticed: that of the academic bourgeoisie.' It was the voice of bourgeois lesbians that was heard in political groups as well as in public. In contrast, proletarian lesbians perceived their own role as 'listeners' who were not being heard.

Faced with the internal differentiation of women within the women's movement, intersectionally marginalised women thus had the collective experience of not being represented and considered due to the exclusive nature of the white women's movement. Drawing on Parkin (1983), who extended Max Weber's concept of closure to encompass collective counteractions by the excluded (ibid. 123f.), the negation of society-shaping structures of power and oppression in the white women's movement can be understood as a reciprocal social closure. This entails the inclusion of white, middle-class women in the movement for women's rights while simultaneously excluding all other women, making marginalised women's strategies of usurpation a discursive necessity to bring their perspectives and concerns into the movements and gain access to the resources claimed by the excluding group of white, privileged women.

So, is this old news? Yes and no. Yes, simply because the struggles for representation are part of the intrinsic knowledge of the movement, and this has also been and continues to be integrated into scientific disciplines to some extent.

No, because the reference to self-representations and self-organisation currently exerts itself in a new form within the support system. At the same time, participation, self-representation, and self-organisation are subject to a changed degree of co-optation in the course of welfare state transformation processes.

In the United Kingdom, the 'User-Participation' advocated by 'Service User Movements' has been taken up by the government and has influenced the restructuring of social services. In Germany, participatory structures to strengthen the voice of users were already implemented in the Children and Youth Welfare Act in 1990, particularly with regard to the legal entitlement to support and the new legal anchoring of the idea of a democratic and dialogue-based organisation of assistance (e.g. §36 assistance plan procedure) (Daigler et al., 2019).

Expanded opportunities for participation also manifested in the personal budget of inclusion assistance. The current reform of the Child and Youth Welfare Act (SGB VIII) and the Federal Participation Act in Germany go beyond the institutionalisation of formal participation, self-representation, and self-organisation rights. At the same time, comprehensive findings indicate an unequal utilisation of participation projects as well as institutionalised procedures aimed at user involvement in planning and decision-making processes in child and youth welfare services (Klein & Landhäußer, 2020; Messmer, 2018). Seemingly, members of socially privileged groups are dominating these participation formats and are able to use them better for themselves (Plöber & Sturzenhecker, 2020; Von Schwanenflügel, 2015). Disadvantaged people, on the other hand, are considered difficult to reach in terms of their opportunities to influence decisions and their experiences of self-efficacy in child and youth welfare (Klein, 2008; Klingler, 2024; Pluto, 2022). According to Wagner (2017), the dominant explanations for this – for example in relation to the socio-economic status of families or the assumed abilities of children – often move ‘between social pathologization and responsabilisation’. As Wagner states, they ‘either appear as ‘weak’ and ‘helpless victims’ who have completely different concerns than being involved in democratic participation, let alone being capable of it. Or – as suggested above all by the ideology of the activating state that demands and supports them – it is simply their own fault if they don’t want to. It is their responsibility’ (Wagner, 2017, p. 232).

Phenomena of social closures regarding self-representation and user participation

In the context of the activation-policy reorganisation of the welfare state, closure theory proves significant, especially as the intervening disciplines and professions increasingly employ community-oriented ‘technologies of citizenship,’ as coined by Cruishank (1999). Several years back, Ulrich Bröckling drew attention to ‘concepts such as empowerment, participation, or self-organisation, procedures like round tables, open space, future workshops, action research, or mediation [that] build upon informal forms of opinion and decision-making and [transform] them into scientifically guided, often professionally operated, and institutionally supported methods’ (cf. Bröckling, 2005, p. 4). Just as the market produces not only successful entrepreneurs but also a multitude of superfluous individuals, according to Bröckling, ‘the communities of civil society define not only memberships but also Others who are excluded from the community’ (ibid.).

In the activation-policy expropriation of central demands of social movements, Social Work, Social Pedagogy, and Special Education do not act ‘against’ but precisely ‘by means of’ such strategies. They run the risk of exacerbating existing social inequalities and power relations rather than compensating for them, as Abeling and Ziegler (2004, p. 279) note that ‘de facto, primarily the articulation and participation opportunities of assertive groups are promoted.’

The issue of selective representation arises precisely where the inclusion of the interests and assessments of the actors – briefly, their voice – is concerned. In so-called user committees in the United Kingdom, it is well-documented that a double selection of voiced interests occurs: these forums tend to incorporate not the interests of all users but rather those of some. Subdominant participants and their interests are not represented to the same extent as they are within the services; instead, underrepresentation is further intensified by prevailing discursive practices (Klein, 2008). For meaningful participation in such spaces of articulation, resources come into play, and these resources are highly unevenly distributed even among users of social services (cf. Beresford, 2013).

‘Shaping Our Lives’ is a British nationwide self-advocacy organisation.² Their user-controlled interview study, ‘Beyond the usual suspects,’ aims to explore how in England it can be ensured that all user groups of health and social services have an equal opportunity for participation and involvement. Which groups and individuals are typically excluded, and how can they be better supported?

In the realm of traditional forms of social inequality, the interviewees share extensive experiences with disrespect, delegitimization, and exclusion, stemming from the intersection of racist, sexist, heteronormative, and ableist positions, as well as age-related homogenizations. Closures are noticeable concerning the utilisation of specific services; for instance, individuals residing in institutions or those

experiencing homelessness often find their voices and concerns scarcely acknowledged in such settings. The same applies to the recognition of individuals who communicate through less conventional means (cf. Beresford, 2013).

The requirement to communicate in a specific manner – which is perceived as central – culminates in a closure strategy towards ‘unwanted voices’ (2013, p. 26): While views that align with one’s own are welcomed, other, more critical perspectives are less well-received, ignored, and silenced. Thus, the representation of user voices is organised through and within the closure against inappropriate articulations and weaker interests of service users. In essence, the research project found no evidence that ‘service users from particularly marginalised groups whose voices were seldom heard did not want to be involved, if lack of access and other barriers were overcome’ (Beresford, 2013, p. 26).

Simultaneously, it is noticeable in the interview study that issues related to the class dimension are hardly addressed. Similarly, the distinction between traditional self – representation and participatory offerings in regular services receives little attention when discussing barriers in interest representation overall.

However, we will now illustrate how beneficial an examination informed by closure theory can be, both in interviews and in the analysis of documents from various forms of self-organisation of the user voices, using a few examples. The data is drawn from our ongoing exploratory pilot study titled ‘Barriers in the support system, self-organization and self-advocacy’, which includes interviews with representatives from various self-advocacy organisations in both disability care and child and youth welfare. The focus on self-organisation in disability care is particularly significant due to its long-standing tradition of self-organisation and self-representation, along with extensive empirical knowledge. In contrast, the institutionalisation of self-representation in child and youth welfare is a more recent development, with substantial progress occurring only in recent years, especially following the reform of Book VIII of the Social Code. Additionally, we have begun to gradually incorporate public materials from various self-advocacy organisations into the analysis of barriers to access and participation, employing an iterative process based on grounded theory methodology.

We have engaged in conversations with various individuals from self-advocacy groups³, we also review various materials from self-organisation. We are consistently interested in how differentiating unequal societal conditions, as well as closure processes in the context of interest representation, are addressed and dealt with in those contexts.

In the founding story of a self-advocacy group within the disability support system, that can be considered a relevant reference due to its long tradition of self-representation and the significant role of the self-representation council in the SGB VIII reform process of child and youth welfare, the negotiation of belonging becomes apparent:

In the initial stages, it’s crucial to establish clear boundaries and maintain a strong stance. There are discussions on whether to accept an intern without a disability or similar matters. This approach is necessary, otherwise you won’t make any progress. Forming a solid standpoint and being able to set yourself apart are crucial steps. (SV A)

Representation of interests and advocacy are constituted through external differentiation, which generates operational effectiveness.

In the beginning, it was primarily people with physical and sensory disabilities, such as blind and physically disabled academics. The group consisted not only of academics but predominantly so, and its composition included – again not solely – politically active members. It was a well-defined and delimited community, and this alignment made logical sense for them. (SV A)

Internal homogeneity seems ‘logical’ in the sense that it associates political engagement with status. This alignment proves to be relatively stable over time.

Disrupting closure processes and the social selectivity of voices requires resources at the representation level: knowledge, time, allies, and financial means. This approach allows for the recognition and, to some extent, the mitigation of homogenisation processes:

Who takes up the most space, who speaks for what and which people, so which groups are missing? Are we perpetuating a situation where mainly white Germans are the main voices speaking there, or what? (SV A)

Accordingly, the knowledge of a multidimensional hierarchization of voices and attention to excluded voices also proves to be important in traditional self-organised self-help groups of disabled people.

Let us look at an example from a more recent self-advocacy group representing individuals in youth welfare. In a publicly available self-description of the organisation, it states:

It emerged from a research project-based network (of adolescents/young adults) with an academic background and has been open to all young people from residential care ever since. The association is open and inclusive concerning educational and migration backgrounds as well as towards people with disabilities, and it is progressively diversifying. (SV B)

Breaking down closure and expanding inclusivity requires time. This wasn't always the case; initially, during its founding, this representation was an academic project. The phrase 'the association is open' can be interpreted from at least three perspectives relevant to closure:

1. There was an old core group in the representation, derived from the history of the association, consisting of white, academized, non-disabled young people.
2. Signifying 'open and inclusive' suggests that there is no discrimination, no racism and that there is awareness and sensitivity for closure and openness.
3. However, in this self-presentation, migrantized individuals and people with disabilities are not only positioned as others, but 'logically' as non-academics.

Discrimination-critical and closure-theoretical bodies of knowledge can uncover this not only as a counterfactual reality but also highlight it as a consequence of closures both externally and internally within self-representations.

The next example also refers to another relatively recently established self-advocacy group of young people at the state level in residential facilities within child and youth welfare. The following excerpt is taken from a document that specifies which groups of people are eligible to vote and stand for election:

All young people who take part in the participation workshops are eligible to vote. They must be living in a residential group or supported housing at the time of the election and be at least 12 years old. [...]To be elected to the council, one must be living in a residential group or supported housing in child and youth welfare at the time of the election and be at least 14 years old. (SV C)

Both the right to vote and the eligibility to vote are tied, among other things, to age requirements. Children must be at least twelve years old and engage in a prior participation format to be eligible to vote for their representatives. Those who do not meet these criteria are excluded from electing their own representatives. Furthermore, it is only at the age of 14 that young people are granted the opportunity to have their interests represented in this institutionalised form. The age homogeneity thus created based on the exclusion of younger individuals undoubtedly has practical advantages for the organisation of weaker interests and the efficiency of the council. At the same time, it remains a socially constructed criterion of closure that effectively prevents the self-organisation of the interests of younger children, as well as those who cannot or do not want to participate in the prior participation format, from institutionally articulating and representing their voice. The socially created, arbitrary and at the same time powerful distribution of age-based rights of service users points to the need to reflect on the role of professionals as powerful gatekeepers. In conversations with young self-advocates, additional specific knowledge about access barriers and closure processes comes to light. The dependence on adult professionals proves to be particularly crucial:

Then I was sent [to a large participation event], and the [professional] also approached me about the participation workshop because she already knew that I like to do things like that.

... And actually, I would have really appreciated the support, but she [professional 2] was totally opposed to it because she preferred to drive in the same direction on Saturday mornings and didn't want to take a two-minute detour to drop me off at the train station. (SV D)

From the perspective of the adolescents, adult professionals act as 'gatekeepers' in the process of participating in advocacy, holding the position to either enable or deny access to participation in advocacy for those children and adolescents who meet the participation criterion of 'age.' The same young person may have different experiences through various professionals: one may motivate them, while another may 'block' them and deny the necessary support perceived by the young person. Beyond the formal access requirements, 'suitable' children and adolescents are thus addressed and invited to participate, receiving varying degrees of necessary support. For the children and adolescents, the institutionalised articulation and representation of their voice are not only limited by age but are also pre-structured in the perception of the self-advocates themselves based on other informal criteria such as alignment.

It seems noteworthy that these informal participation requirements are not emphasised by the professionals but are considered relevant by the young self-advocates themselves:

Especially the younger ones, I believe, don't really know how to articulate themselves clearly yet. (...) We don't have to be able to do that from the beginning. And I think exactly this point, that we don't have to already know everything to join this committee, hasn't yet reached the younger ones. (SV D)

Representing oneself and one's interests individually and collectively, having a voice in relevant bodies of child and youth welfare, proves to be complex and demanding, even in the perception of self-advocacy. Participation in these bodies apparently requires a specific ability of articulation, which is not equally accessible to all children and adolescents.

We are all German native speakers. [...] Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, Afghan ... we don't speak any of those. We can't [...] Of course, there are things like Google Translate. There are tools for that. Yes, but it's just annoying when we can't communicate with each other. [...] Primarily because they are not taken along to the participation workshops. Because they don't understand us at all. That doesn't make any sense for them. And I, I, I also understand that it's extremely frustrating for them when everyone around them speaks a language they don't understand. (SV D)

Regardless of whether the assumed specific speaking ability is perceived as impaired due to a different native language or age-related language proficiency, a powerful limitation of interest articulation and participation within the self-representation of children and adolescents becomes evident. This raises the central question of how the consequences of both formal and informal access and participation barriers, selection, and closure processes are reflected upon and addressed within this framework involving children, adolescents and the adult, professional 'gatekeepers'. Currently, it cannot be answered to what extent such participation rules are questioned and potentially discussed for transformation within self-representations or whether there is evidence of the phenomenon that a socially selective and simultaneously individualising 'incompetence attribution' (Pluto & Seckinger, 2003) becomes relevant not only through professionals but also through those who possess the relevant knowledge and skills, updating, reinforcing, or relativising it.

These are just a few highlights that we have brought into focus here, each deserving a closer evaluation. Even in this illustrative overview, it becomes tangible that self-representation and self-organisation – the voice of the service users within the welfare system – are constituted under the conditions of diverse social inequalities, social closure, and homogenisation.

Our data indicates that strengthening self-representation in the child – and youth welfare system has the potential to effectively organise some previously marginalised voices. At the same time, significant challenges related to usurpation and collective counter-strategies also become apparent. For example, there is a danger that existing inequalities, which are familiar from support systems and social movements, are also reproduced in and with these groups. The question of who has the means and opportunities to express their concerns, organise their interests and make their voices

heard in different contexts therefore remains a key challenge, especially as self-organisations within the aid system are becoming increasingly important. In addition, there is the historically known risk of pedagogical and political instrumentalization as well as the potential expropriation and devaluation of self-advocacy services within the current institutional framework. It becomes clear that even within self-organised groups of marginalised individuals, dimensions of inequality such as gender, ethnicity, class, ability and body are relevant and, accordingly, whose voice is heard and included in political and pedagogical discourses.

At the convergence of social pedagogy and special education, and in the analysis of conditions influencing the opportunities for expressing interests, participation, and self-representation in inclusive child and youth welfare, the reflexivity on inequality and sensitivity to diversity prove to be both an explicit and implicit imperative from the service users extending to disciplines, professions, and politics.

Notes

1. The 'Children and Young People Strengthening Act', which came into effect in 2021, laid the foundation for inclusive child and youth welfare in Germany. By 2028, the responsibility for children and young people with disabilities will be assigned to all youth welfare institutions. The goal of merging supervisory assistance (Hilfen zur Erziehung) with integration assistance (Eingliederungshilfe) is to prevent the often problematic exclusion processes and shifts in responsibility, thereby ensuring equal participation and access to services to all children regardless of their abilities. The 'inclusive solution' establishes the overall responsibility of child and youth welfare as a defined and specialised policy programme. With the reform of Social Code Book VIII, youth welfare services are now tasked with promoting self-representation among beneficiaries and actively incorporating their voices into professional discourses and decision-making. Section 4a has been newly drafted and introduced for this purpose.
2. <https://shapingourlives.org.uk/>
3. As we conducted the interviews with non-vulnerable groups, an ethics vote on the part of our institution was not necessary.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Alexandra Klein (Univ. Prof.), is a professor at the Institute of Education Sciences at JGU Mainz. She teaches and conducts research on the theory and empirics of heterogeneity and inequality in childhood and youth. Her focus is on the intervention logics of social work.

Stephanie Langer (M.A.), is an education scientist and inclusion researcher. She researches inclusion in early childhood education and social inequality in early childhood, with a focus on constructions of difference in early childhood education.

Amina Kaddour-Dugonjic (M.A.), is an education scientist and racism researcher. She researches racism in educational contexts and the intersections of racism with other societal power relations. Her focus is on anti-Muslim racism in early childhood education institutions.

References

- Abeling, M., & Ziegler, H. (2004). Governance des sozialen Raums. Räumlichkeit und soziales Kapital in der Sozialen Arbeit. In F. Kessl, & H.-U. Otto (Eds.), *Soziale Arbeit und Soziales Kapital. Zur Kritik lokaler Gemeinschaftlichkeit* (pp. 269–289). Springer VS.
- Aktaş, G., (1993). ‚Türkische Frauen sind wie ein Schatten‘. Leben und Arbeiten im Frauenhaus. In I. Hügel, & C. Lange et al. (Eds.), *Entfernte Verbindungen. Rassismus, Antisemitismus, Klassenunterdrückung* (pp. 49–60). Orlanda Frauenverlag.
- Anzaldúa, G., & Moraga, C. (2021). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*. State of New York Press. (Original work published 1981)

- Beresford, P. (2013). *Beyond the usual suspects*. Shaping our lives.
- Bitzan, M., Bolay, E., & Thiersch, H. eds. (2006). *Die Stimme der Adressaten. Empirische Forschung über Erfahrungen von Mädchen und Jungen mit der Jugendhilfe*. Juventa.
- Bröckling, U. (2005). Gleichgewichtsübungen. Die Mobilisierung des Bürgers zwischen Markt, Zivilgesellschaft und aktivierendem Staat. In: spw – sozialistische Politik und Wirtschaft, p. 19–22.
- Combahee River Collective. (2014). A black feminist statement. *Women's studies quarterly*, 42(3/4), 271–280. (Original work published 1977) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24365010>.
- Cruishank, B. (1999). *The will to empower. Democratic citizens and other subjects*. Cornell University Press.
- Daigler, C., Rosenbauer, N., & Struck, N. (2019). Hilfen zur Erziehung. Socialnet online Lexikon. <https://www.socialnet.de/lexikon/Hilfe-zur-Erziehung>.
- Ehrig, H. (1996). "Verminderte Heiratschancen" oder Perspektivengewinn? *Lebensentwürfe und Lebenswirklichkeit körperbehinderter Frauen*. Kleine Verlag.
- Haraway, D. (1991). Situated knowledges. The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. In D. Haraway (Ed.), *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature* (pp. 183–201). Routledge.
- Kang, C.-S., (1993). Von Selbstbestimmung keine Rede. Frauen im AusländerInnen- und Asylrecht. In I. Hügel, & C. Lange et al. (Eds.), *Entfernte Verbindungen. Rassismus, Antisemitismus, Klassenunterdrückung* (pp. 238–254). Orlanda Frauenverlag.
- Klein, A. (2008). 'Soziales Kapital online'. Soziale Unterstützung im Internet. Eine Rekonstruktion virtualisierter Formen sozialer Ungleichheit. Dissertation an der Uni Bielefeld (<https://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/record/2301811>).
- Klein, A., & Landhäußer, S. (2020). Vorwärts immer, rückwärts nimmer. Von Forschung zu Partizipation zu partizipativer Forschung. In B. Arbeitsgruppe (Ed.), *Wie geht's weiter mit Forschung in der Sozialen Arbeit* (pp. 61–72). Verlag neue praxis.
- Klingler, B. (2024). Beteiligung autonomer Subjekte. Die pädagogische Aufforderung zur Partizipation im Kontext institutioneller Ordnung. In S. Dahmen, Z. Demir, B. Ertugrul, D. Kloss, & B. Ritter (Eds.), *Politisierung und Jugend* (pp. 184–203). Beltz Juventa.
- Lohrenscheit, C. (2023). Die globalen Bewegungen für Kinderrechte. Ein Interview mit Manfred Liebel. In C. Lohrenscheit, A. Schmelz, C. Schmitt, und U. Straub (Eds.), *Internationale Soziale Arbeit und soziale Bewegungen* (pp. 83–98). Nomos.
- Mackert, J. (2003). Ausschliessung und Usurpation. Multikulturalismus und soziale Exklusion in schliessungstheoretischer Perspektive. *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 1/2003, 69–91.
- Mackert, J. (Ed.) (2004). *Die Theorie sozialer Schließung. Tradition, Analysen, Perspektiven*. Springer VS.
- Messmer, H. (2018). Barrieren von Partizipation. *Der Beitrag empirischer Forschung für ein realistisches Partizipationsverständnis in der Sozialen Arbeit*. In G. Dobslaw (Ed.), *Partizipation – Teilhabe – Mitgestaltung. Interdisziplinäre Zugänge* (pp. 109–128). Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Oelerich, G., & Schaarschuch, A. (2005). *Soziale Dienstleistungen aus Nutzersicht. Zum Gebrauchswert Sozialer Arbeit*. Ernst Reinhardt.
- Opratto, B. (2019). *Im Namen der Emanzipation. Antimuslimischer Rassismus in Österreich*. transcript.
- Otyakmaz, ÖB. (1995). *Auf allen Stühlen. Das Selbstverständnis junger türkischer Migrantinnen in Deutschland*. Neuer ISP Verlag.
- Parkin, F. (1974). *The Social Analysis of Class Structure*. Tavistock Publications.
- Parkin, F. (1983). Strategien sozialer Schließung und Klassenbildung. In R. Kreckel (Ed.), *Soziale Ungleichheit. Sonderband 2, Soziale Welt* (pp. 121–135). Verlag Otto Schwartz & Co.
- Pfahl, L., & Köbsell, S. (2016). Von „Krüppelfrauen“ zu „Disability and Mad Pride“. Grenzen der Sichtbarkeit von Geschlecht und Behinderung. In G. Both, I. Greusing, S. Grenz, T. König, L. Pfahl, K. Sabisch, & S. Völker (Eds.), *Bewegung/en. Dokumentation der 5. Jahrestagung der Fachgesellschaft Gender Studies* (pp. 61–74). Barbara Budrich.
- Plangger, S., & Schönwiese, V. (2015). Behinderung und Gerechtigkeit. *Juridikum – Zeitschrift für Kritik, Recht, Gesellschaft. Das Band; Monatsblatt Fur Kranke Und Gesunde*, 2015(1), 74–84.
- Plöber, M., & Sturzenhecker, B. (2020). Differenz und Demokratie im Partizipationsalltag der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe. In B. Sturzenhecker, T. Clawe, & M. Schwerthelm (Eds.), *Förderung demokratischen Engagements von Kindern und Jugendlichen. Aus der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe in die Kommune* (pp. 277–309). Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung.
- Pluto, L. (2022). Partizipation von Kindern und Jugendlichen in Einrichtungen stationärer Hilfen zur Erziehung. In K. Peyerl, & I. Züchner (Eds.), *Partizipation in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe. Anspruch, Ziele und Formen der Partizipation von Kindern und Jugendlichen* (pp. 140–152). Beltz Juventa.
- Pluto, L., & Seckinger, M. (2003). Die Wilde 13. Scheinbare Gründe, warum Beteiligung in der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe nicht funktionieren kann. In Sozialpädagogisches Institut des SOS-Kinderdorf e.V. (Ed.), *Beteiligung ernst nehmen. Dokumentation zur Fachtagung des SOS-Kinderdorfes e.V., 1-3. November 2001, Immenreuth* (pp. 59–81). Eigenverlag.
- Rohrmann, E. (2021). Missverständnisse und Desinformationen zur Inklusion Historische Rekonstruktionen und Gegenwartsanalysen. In D; Bergold-Caldwell, W. Dierkes, E. Georg, L. Spahn, & J. Will (Eds.), *(Denk)Bewegungen zwischen Kritik, Norm und Utopie* (pp. 171–185). Verlag Ulrike Herder.
- Schnurr, S. (2018). Partizipation. In H.-U. Otto, H. Thiersch, R. Treptow, & H. Ziegler (Eds.), *Handbuch Soziale Arbeit* (pp. 631–648). Ernst Reinhardt Verlag.

- Seyboldt, R. (2021). Auf dem richtigen Weg, aber noch lange nicht angekommen. Gedanken zum KJSG aus Careleaver-Perspektive. *Sozial Extra*, 45, 430–435.
- Stoll, J. (2014). „Behinderung“ als Kategorie sozialer Ungleichheit. Entstehung und Entwicklung der „Lebenshilfe für das geistig behinderte Kind“ in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in den 1950er und 1960er Jahren. *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 54, p. 169-191 (<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/afs/bd54/afs-54-2014-08-stoll.pdf>).
- Von Schwanenflügel, L. (2015). *Partizipationsbiografien Jugendlicher. Zur subjektiven Bedeutung von Partizipation im Kontext sozialer Ungleichheit*. Springer VS.
- Wagner, L. (2009). *Soziale Arbeit und Soziale Bewegungen*. Springer VS.
- Wagner, T. (2017). Dabei sein ist nicht Alles! Gründe der Nicht-Nutzung von Teilnahmeverfahren in der Sozialen Arbeit aus demokratie- und ungleichheitstheoretischer Perspektive. In B. Schäuble, & L. Wagner (Eds.), *Personenzentrierte Hilfeplanung*. Beltz/Juventa (pp. 230–244).
- Wagner, T. (2022). ... And Justice for all? Zur schwierigen Beziehung zwischen sozialen Bewegungen und Sozialer Arbeit. Oder: wie „staatsbedürftig“ sind eigentlich Kämpfe um soziale „Ge-Rechtigkeit“? *Widersprüche*, 42(165), 11–23.
- Walgenbach, K. (2007). Gender als interdependente Kategorie. In K. Walgenbach, H. A. Dietze, & K. Palm (Eds.), *Gender als interdependente Kategorie. Neue Perspektiven auf Intersektionalität, Diversität und Heterogenität* (pp. 23–64). Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Walgenbach, K. (2014). *Heterogenität - Intersektionalität - Diversity in der Erziehungswissenschaft*. Verlag Barbara Budrich.
- Weber, M. (1985). *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*. J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck). (Original work published 1922)
- Widersprüche. (2021). *Heft 161, Soziale Bewegungen und Soziale Arbeit. Konflikte, Konkurrenzen, Kooperationen/*.
- Widersprüche. (2022). *Heft 165, Bewegungen und Aktivismen in, neben und gegen Soziale Arbeit*.
- Wiesner, R. (2016). Jugendhilfereport 02.16: 25 Jahre SGB VIII. Ein Gesetz im Wandel der Zeit, https://www.lvr.de/media/wwwlvrde/jugend/service/publikationen/dokumente_97/JHR_02_2016~1.pdf, 18.07.2024.
- Witte, M. (2013). Klassismuskritik und gelebte Umverteilung: Die Geschichte einer Berliner Prolo- Lesbengruppe. In C. Rudolf (Ed.), *Schneewittchen rechnet ab: Feministische Ökonomie für anderes Leben, Arbeiten und Produzieren* (pp. 81–90). VSA Verlag.