

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL HANDICAP IN THE CONTEXT OF INCLUSION: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL LIFE

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Abstract: *This article analyses the challenges and perspectives of social participation of people with social-emotional disabilities in the context of inclusion. Based on a qualitative expert interview with Winfried Klaes, which was conducted as part of a dissertation, the effects of early childhood stress experiences on the development of self-regulation skills are analysed and the central limitations of current educational approaches that focus on autonomy and self-determination are highlighted. The results show that traditional educational methods are often ineffective or counterproductive for those affected, as lasting neurobiological changes (in particular dysregulation of the stress systems) make independent self-regulation considerably more difficult. Klaes defines four central factors in the development of a social-emotional handicap: early stress, disturbed developmental windows of neuronal maturation, chronic stress experience and epigenetic changes. These factors make the usual expectations of autonomy within current inclusion concepts unrealistic. The article calls for a fundamental change of perspective in education and social policy. Attachment-oriented, neuro-systemic and process-oriented interventions are recommended, which are individually tailored to provide long-term stabilisation. Klaes also proposes the official recognition of social-emotional disabilities in accordance with Section 2, Paragraph 1 of Book IX of the German Social Code as well as adjustments to training and funding. In conclusion, the article emphasises the need for a socio-political consensus on the definition of social-emotional disability in order to establish appropriate support services. The study has limitations as it is based on the perspective of a single expert. Future research should integrate further expert opinions as well as the perspectives of educators, those affected and carers.*

Keywords: *Social-emotional Handicap; Inclusion; Early Childhood Stress; Self-regulation; Paradigm Shift in Pedagogy*

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, current educational theory has developed an increased focus on enabling all people, regardless of their individual abilities and needs, to participate in society on an equal footing. One area that deserves particular attention in this context is social-emotional disabilities. People with this type of impairment face considerable challenges when it comes to integration into educational, work and social contexts: While perceptible aspects, of a physical or cognitive nature, of disability are often the focus of inclusive endeavours, the physically invisible effects of social-emotional difficulties on participation in social life are often misinterpreted. The reason for this is common educational practice, which focusses on autonomy and self-determination as a goal, whereby self-regulation and personal responsibility are assumed. However, recent research clearly indicates that people with a social-emotional handicap in particular have considerable difficulties in developing these self-regulation skills at all due to early childhood experiences of deprivation and stress (Klaes 2019; Klaes & Johnson 2016a, 2016b). John Bowlby (2006) and Mary Ainsworth et al. (2015) already showed that early attachment experiences form a central basis for the long-term development of emotional stability. If children are exposed to chronic stress from birth, this experience of stress often leads to persistent dysregulation of the stress systems on a neurobiological level (Hostinar & Gunnar 2013). The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA axis) in particular is permanently affected by this, which makes long-term and independent self-regulation in later life considerably more difficult or can even lead to mental and physical illnesses (Charmandari et al. 2005; Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007; Hostinar & Gunnar 2013). From a neuroscientific perspective, Strüber (2016) and Uvnäs-Moberg (2016) also show that secure attachment experiences are necessary for the development of neuronal structures that later enable independent stress regulation. According to Klaes and Johnson (2016a), if this foundation is not sufficiently developed, this leads to a long-term social and emotional disability, which they define as a social-emotional

handicap. As a result, traditional pedagogical approaches, which presuppose self-regulation and personal responsibility, reach their limits here.

Instead, sustainable social participation of those affected requires special and customised support measures that take into account individual needs and impaired neuronal development (Johnson 2019; Klaes 2019). An exclusive focus on autonomy and self-determination, without taking into account the neurobiological and developmental prerequisites, therefore often leads to excessive demands, exclusion and ultimately to the intensification of existing disadvantages.

This article examines the perspectives for the participation of people with social-emotional disabilities in the context of inclusion. It is based on the analysis of an expert interview with Winfried Klaes, an experienced psychologist, family therapist, supervisor and organisational consultant, who played a key role in coining the term social-emotional handicap. Based on these findings, the aim of the article is to analyse the context-dependent and overall political effects of social-emotional handicaps. The results should serve to provide new professional impetus and highlight necessary structural changes that will enable a sustainable improvement in the participation and integration of affected people in society and the world of work.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach in the form of a written qualitative expert interview (Schiek 2022) was chosen in order to capture these complex relationships more precisely. This interview was conducted as part of a dissertation with the psychologist Winfried Klaes, a renowned expert who played a key role in defining and establishing the term social-emotional handicap. Klaes has extensive practical experience with affected children, adolescents and young adults. The interview was based on four central guiding questions based on the SPSS method according to Helfferich (2011), which focussed on recording the state of knowledge about social-emotional handicaps, their underlying causes and principles, effective intervention measures and existing gaps in research and practice. The evaluation was carried out using a content-structuring qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2020) in order to identify central statements on challenges and perspectives with regard to social participation in the context of inclusion.

Limitation

The study is based on the perspective of a single, albeit recognised, expert. Future research should include other experts as well as the views of educators, those affected and carers in order to achieve more comprehensive results.

RESULTS

The following results provide an insight into the key findings of the expert interview and illustrate the challenges of current educational practice. Winfried Klaes sees a change in the way social-emotional handicaps have been viewed in recent decades. At the beginning of the 2000s, a significant increase in children and young people with socially conspicuous and emotionally uncontrolled behaviour was observed, which has since pushed the professional help system to its limits. While these observations were initially seen as an individual problem, it was increasingly recognised that this was a social phenomenon. Advances in developmental neurobiology and neuroscience have contributed significantly to the understanding that the focus has shifted to the interaction between the social environment and the development of the child's brain, taking into account the significance of early stress. Klaes argues in favour of a clear distinction between a serious developmental impediment and a manifest social-emotional handicap in which the neuroplastic capacity of the brain is significantly impaired by massive early childhood stress.

Klaes identifies four central principles that are essential for understanding social-emotional disabilities in contrast to other disorders. Firstly, early-life stress plays a decisive role, especially in the first two years of life, as it leads to brain morphological changes in the brain. Secondly, it can lead to a disruption in the opening and closing of sensitive developmental windows, particularly in the right hemisphere, which impairs the development of self-regulating networks in the long term. Thirdly, the permanence of the stress experience in the form of a chronic and emotionally unfiltered influence on early brain maturation processes is fundamental. Fourthly, epigenetic effects play a decisive role insofar as early stress experiences leave lasting changes in gene expression that impair stress regulation and can even be passed on transgenerationally.

Klaes argues that these four factors are interrelated and can occur over time, which ultimately causes the development of a social-emotional handicap.

The analysis of the interview with Winfried Klaes makes it clear that the current pedagogical approaches, which pursue autonomy and self-determination as their primary goal, are not suitable for people with a social-emotional handicap. He explicitly emphasises that this prominent objective is unrealistic and even counterproductive for the affected group due to the neurobiologically determined and permanent deficits in self-regulation. Early childhood stress experiences and deprivation lead to permanent neuronal changes, particularly in stress regulation via the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA axis), which make long-term independent self-regulation significantly more difficult or impossible, as Gunnar and Quevedo (2007) also point out in their studies.

According to Klaes, the inclusion of affected people with social-emotional disabilities poses considerable challenges. Traditional educational interventions (such as incentive and reward systems or purely behavioural therapies) often only show limited effectiveness – if any at all – as essential functional systems such as the motivation and curiosity system and action control are barely responsive in those affected by automated stress experiences. On the contrary, the well-meaning use of such methods, which do not address the causes, can increase the pressure of demands and lead to a more pronounced form of behavioural abnormalities.

The current paradigm of inclusion with its focus on self-determination and personal responsibility therefore increases the risk of pushing people with a pronounced social-emotional handicap beyond their own limits, which can inadvertently lead to exclusion. Winfried Klaes questions whether this approach is appropriate for these people, as early childhood stress experiences can have a lasting impact on the development of self-regulation skills, which are, however, a prerequisite for the current goals of education.

According to Klaes, this creates an area of tension: to what extent must pedagogy differentiate itself in order to meet the diverse needs of all learners? Are current pedagogical concepts still up-to-date at all, and how can educational institutions find a balance between the required autonomy on the one hand and the provision of necessary support and guidance on the other?

The discussion about inclusion is closely linked to this. Klaes strongly warns against trying to force inclusion at all costs, as this can quickly overwhelm people with social-emotional disabilities and ultimately lead to exclusion. The current inclusion paradigm, which emphasises self-regulation, independence and self-realisation, proves to be inappropriate in many cases, which raises the question: How can we prevent inclusion efforts from unintentionally leading to the exclusion of certain groups of people?

Klaes sees the perspective for improved participation of people with social-emotional disabilities in the consistent application of the findings resulting from the synthesis of traditional attachment theory and current neuroscientific research. He argues in favour of prioritising interactive approaches to building attachment and co-regulation that are tailored to the social-emotional developmental age of those affected and incorporate basic communicative pathways. He refers to the “concept of systemic stress regulation” (now part of “neuro-systemic practice”), which combines body- and action-orientated forms of intervention. What is important here is a process-oriented approach that aims less to achieve specific goals and more to expand the scope of action of those affected by stabilising them emotionally through external long-term help. Klaes emphasises the need for openness in terms of time and the establishment of settings in which help can be coordinated and ideally provided “from a single source”. He sees great potential in the implementation of effective interventions and forms of setting organisation in existing social institutions such as the elementary sector, schools, child and youth welfare and integration assistance.

In order to counteract exclusion through inappropriate inclusive approaches geared towards autonomy and self-determination, Klaes calls for a political paradigm shift towards the systematic recognition of long-term support needs. As a central overall political consequence, he proposes officially recognising the social-emotional handicap as an independent form of disability in accordance with Section 2, Paragraph 1 SGB IX and establishing institutionalised long-term support measures under social law.

However, Klaes currently sees the greatest challenge in the fact that existing findings from brain research have so far only been insufficiently integrated into social work practice. A synthesis of traditional attachment theory according to Bowlby (2006) and Ainsworth (2015) and current neuroscientific findings

(e.g. Strüber 2016) would be necessary in order to develop customised measures. He therefore calls for a stronger interlinking of neuroscientific research and educational practice as well as an adaptation of training programmes and funding logic in the area of social policy.

Last but not least, Klaes emphasises the lack of social acceptance and common understanding of social-emotional disabilities. He argues in favour of a professional and political consensus on when and how a social-emotional handicap must be defined in order to ensure appropriate and long-term support services.

In conclusion, it can be said that a sustainable improvement in the situation of people with social-emotional disabilities can only be achieved through a holistic perspective and the personal and institutional commitment of all those involved. In practice, concrete recommendations for action and increased political support are needed in order to successfully implement long-term measures.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the interview clearly shows that the existing inclusive concepts, which focus primarily on autonomy and self-determination, do not meet the needs of people with social-emotional disabilities. A paradigm shift is needed in order to recognise social-emotional disabilities politically and under social law as an independent form of disability and to create long-term support structures that enable sustainable social participation in the first place.

Inclusive practice requires more differentiation: in addition to reflexive and individually adapted autonomy, co-regulative, attachment-oriented services for certain groups must also be recognised. A close interlinking of neuroscience, attachment theory and social pedagogy is necessary for this and should be integrated into training programmes. Educational and social policy must therefore make the transition from short-term success-orientation to long-term, process-oriented care concepts. Funding systems and evaluation logics must be adapted in order to recognise sustainable stabilisation as a goal. The complexity of social-emotional disabilities requires interdisciplinary cooperation between neuroscience, psychology, education and social work in order to develop interventions. Targeted educational work is necessary to increase social acceptance, create understanding and reduce stigmatisation instead of reinforcing it.

But are we as a society really ready to initiate the necessary changes that are required for true inclusion of people with social-emotional disabilities, or do defensive behaviour and well-intentioned declarations of intent remain the norm?

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СОЦИАЛНО-ЕМОЦИОНАЛНОТО УВРЕЖДАНЕ В КОНТЕКСТА НА ПРИОБИЩАВАНЕТО: ПРЕДИЗВИКАТЕЛСТВА И ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ ЗА УЧАСТИЕ В СОЦИАЛНИЯ ЖИВОТ

Резюме: В тази статия се анализират предизвикателствата и перспективите за участие в социалния живот на хората със социално-емоционални увреждания в контекста на приобщаването. Въз основа на качествено експертно интервю с Винфрид Клаес, проведено като част от дисертационния труд, се анализират последиците от стресовите преживявания в ранното детство върху развитието на уменията за саморегулация и се изтъкват основните ограничения на настоящите образователни подходи, които се фокусират върху автономността и самоопределението. Резултатите показват, че традиционните образователни методи често са неефективни или контрапродуктивни за засегнатите лица, тъй като трайните невробιολогични промени (по-специално дисрегулацията на стресовите системи) значително затрудняват независимата саморегулация. Клаес определя четири централни фактора в развитието на социално-емоционалния недостатък: ранен стрес, нарушени прозорци на развитие на невронното съзряване, хронично преживяване на стрес и епигенетични промени. Тези фактори правят нереалистични обичайните очаквания за автономност в рамките на настоящите концепции за приобщаване. Статията призовава за фундаментална промяна на гледната точка в образованието и социалната политика. Препоръчват се интервенции, ориентирани към привързаността, невросистемни и процесни интервенции, които са индивидуално съобразени, за да осигурят дългосрочна стабилизация. Клаес предлага също така официалното признаване на социално-емоционалните увреждания в съответствие с раздел 2, параграф 1 от книга IX на Германския социален кодекс, както и корекции в обучението и финансирането. В заключение статията подчертава необходимостта от социално-политически консенсус по отношение на определението за социално-емоционално увреждане, за да се създадат подходящи услуги за подкрепа.

Проучването има ограничения, тъй като се основава на гледната точка на един експерт. Бъдещите изследвания следва да включват допълнителни експертни мнения, както и гледните точки на педагози, засегнати лица и настойници.

Ключови думи: социално-емоционално увреждане; приобщаване; стрес в ранна детска възраст; саморегулация; промяна на парадигмата в педагогиката

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