

Universalist children’s services. From two-part to inclusive social infrastructure

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Abstract The scientific network “Universalist Children’s Services: From Two-Part to Inclusive Social Infrastructure,” funded by the German Research Foundation, comprises 20 researchers. Its purpose is to contribute to the development of a more inclusive design of the public children’s services system. To achieve this objective, the network integrates legal and educational perspectives in its analysis of the current structure of the children’s services system. The network’s starting point is the concept of universalist children’s services, and its aim is to engage in experimental discussions on the potential transformation of the current (exclusive) two-part structure into a predominantly universalist service framework. The ultimate goal is to initiate a foundational and interdisciplinary discourse to identify future research needs in this field.

Keywords Stigma · (Targeted) family support · Social work · Inclusion · Goffman

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Bedingungslose Jugendhilfe. Von der zweiteiligen zur inklusiven sozialen Infrastruktur

Zusammenfassung Das von der DFG geförderte Wissenschaftliche Netzwerk „Bedingungslose Jugendhilfe. Von der zweiteiligen zur inklusiven sozialen Infrastruktur“ besteht aus 20 Wissenschaftler:innen. Es hat sich zusammengeschlossen, um einen Beitrag zur inklusiveren Ausgestaltung der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe zu leisten. Hierfür werden rechts- und erziehungswissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf die gegenwärtige Leistungsstruktur der Kinder- und Jugendhilfe zusammengeführt. Den Ausgangspunkt des Netzwerks bildet die Idee einer „Bedingungslosen Jugendhilfe“. Es soll experimentierend diskutiert werden, ob und inwiefern ein inklusiveres Jugendhilfesystem gestaltet werden kann, wenn seine gegenwärtige (exkludierende) Zweiteilung in eine weitgehend bedingungslose Leistungsstruktur transformiert werden würde. Ziel ist es, einen grundlagentheoretischen und interdisziplinär angelegten Diskurs zu eröffnen, um zukünftige Forschungsbedarfe zu identifizieren.

Schlüsselwörter Stigma · Hilfen zur Erziehung · Soziale Arbeit · Inklusion · Goffman

1 Research status

The German system of children’s services (Social Code, Book VIII) is the central public infrastructure that supports young people and their families in enabling self-determined life plans and participation in society (Böllert 2018, p. 4). The public children’s services are divided into open universalist services (§ 11–26) and targeted family support (§ 27–35). The universalist services are available to all young people and parents and can be conceptually understood as public socialization services (Dewe and Otto 2012). This public responsibility for the upbringing of children and adolescents is extensive, as evidenced by day nurseries (§ 22–26), which have become an indispensable part of the social infrastructure that strengthens parents in their autonomous parenting (Schrödter 2020). The combination of private and social infrastructural resources for ordinary support needs is collectively referred to as the family’s self-sufficient ability to manage their lives autonomously. In addition to these universalist children’s services, targeted family support (*Hilfen zur Erziehung*) is available in accordance with §§ 27–35. To access these services, there must be a diagnosed educational need (cf. Smessaert 2022), meaning that “adequate education for the child or adolescent cannot be ensured” (§ 27 [1]). The system of children’s services serves as the state’s sentinel for the child’s welfare. If appropriate education is not provided, the state may recommend educational assistance. If the welfare of the child (according to § 1666 of the German Civil Code) is endangered, affected, or threatened, the state must intervene and order family support interventions or temporarily or permanently revoke parental custody. According to this public children’s service structure, targeted family support is currently designed not as complementary but as compensatory services for families (Thalheim 2021). By legally referring to deficiencies within the family, targeted family support involves exclusionary dimen-

sions that can lead to stigma for their users (Thalheim *i.E.*) 2023, creating barriers to access (Oelerich et al. 2019).

Against this background, the current children's services can be characterized as a two-part system, divided into universalist and targeted services. Thus, an inclusive and exclusive range of services is created, which structurally stigmatizes those individuals who are only entitled to access family support based on deviating deficiencies (Schrödter et al. 2021) potentially maintaining fragile life plans for those individuals (Thalheim and Schrödter 2021). Such categorizations seem to contradict a broad understanding of inclusion, not limited to disabilities, which seeks to overcome deficit-oriented categories of individuals (Schönecker 2020, p. 2) and aims to meet the individual educational, care, and support needs of every young person "while minimizing the use of special facilities and services for specific groups" (BMFSFJ 2013, p. 370).

Furthermore, diagnostic procedures are associated with targeted family support, in which it is tested whether parents are "normal" or "resistant" or whether there is a deviating educational need (Freres 2023). These deficit-oriented needs assessments (e.g., home visits) have been described in studies as interrogations that put pressure on parents or try to provoke them through blame, which can be stigmatizing and degrading (Biesel and Urban-Stahl 2018; Bode and Turba 2014; Franzheld 2017; Freres et al. 2019; Pomey 2017).

Overall, there is a tension between the two-part, exclusionary system structure of children's services and its intended inclusive mandate.

2 Objectives and work program

The network funded by the German Research Foundation comprises 20 researchers. It aims to provide an opportunity for a fundamental theoretical discussion on whether and to what extent a more inclusive children's service system can be designed by transforming its (exclusive) division into a largely universalist service structure.

Drawing on the expertise of the 20 network members, the complex research question will be addressed in an interdisciplinary manner by bringing together legal and educational perspectives that are considered essential for shaping the Social Code, Book VIII.

The network aims to initiate a discourse on the idea of transforming targeted family support services into universalist services. Disciplinary consensus, such as educational need as a legal prerequisite for accessing targeted family support, can be broken up through interdisciplinary exchange, fostering alternative and innovative approaches that promise important points of reference for future inclusion-oriented research on the public system of children's services.

In a total of six working meetings over 3 years, fundamental research needs of the system of children's services from the perspectives of law, childhood and family studies, and social work theory will be identified and eventually published, with the goal of contributing to the international discourse on universalist social service provision.

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