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Socialist education for people with intellectual disabilities in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) – Conditions and impact of ideological indoctrination

Introduction

"In history we were taught about the Romans, the Greeks and the working class... I was a member of the Thälmann Pioneers¹... Today I often dream of the old times in the GDR." (Fraas 2002)

The quotation is an excerpt from a text written by a woman with Down -Syndrome who was born in the GDR in 1955. It was composed a few years after the German reunification of 1990 and shows that the past has still not lost its relevance for this author. It is remarkably rare to find such written sources because people with intellectual disabilities in this country didn't usually have the opportunity to develop literacy skills.

For this group, as well as for the majority of the population, the abrupt absence of the GDR's political and cultural environment in the wake of the German reunification was perceived as a crucial experience. Sociologists today notice a trend that people who grew up in the GDR often glorify their past. This is true for people with and without intellectual disabilities. Recent studies found an increasing gap between the East and the West of Germany concerning the emergence of special identities in the East - or better said: a distinct East-German consciousness (Zapf 2000). In addition, the German society is facing a serious problem of a rising popularity of right-wing political ideas, particularly within broad segments of the East-German population. It is likely, the same is true for people with intellectual disabilities.

The question is: Why is there still this significant difference 18 years after the German reunification? There may be many reasons: for example the population in the East is a minority of only 20% of the entire German population. The economic power in the East is still less than that in the West, not to mention that many people in the East now feel like they have been conquered by the West instead of having experienced the reunification on an equal footing (Zapf 2000).

But more seriously and still more influential to the present situation in my opinion, is the difference in socialization which took place in the past. Growing up in the GDR was steadily connected with an ideological influence. This is

1 the socialist mass organization for children

held to be true for people with intellectual disabilities as well. The consequences indoctrination are still noticeable: Of course this indoctrination had a strong impact on their identity. Of course indoctrination in real socialism exerted influence on their minds and thoughts. And of course any kind of education shapes ideals and values - both in the East and in the West. 40 years of difference are not simply wiped away by a key policy decision.

Before I tell you about an ongoing survey I would like to outline the GDR's system of education for people with intellectual disabilities as well as the image of disability in socialist theory.

Socialist education for children with intellectual disabilities in the GDR

Soon after WW2, the system of special education was reestablished under pre-war conditions (Werner 1999). Like in West-Germany and other countries, special education was divided into different branches, such as education for the deaf, the blind or those with speech impediments. There were no educational programs for people with intellectual disabilities although a few visited special schools which were intended for students with learning difficulties.

Starting in 1948, mainstream schools went through a period of 'Sovietization' and 'ideologization', although initially this movement had no effect on special schools. With the beginning of the 1960s, this changed. Special education, known in the GDR as 'Rehabilitation Education', was integrated into the system of socialist education. At the same time, day-care centers for children with intellectual disabilities were established. As a consequence thereof, the few students of this group who visited special schools were excluded from schools and did not get the opportunity to receive training in literacy skills any more. Officially this step was regarded as a vital necessity for the improvement of education in special schools. This version was based on the idea that not teaching literacy and mathematical skills to students who are not able to learn them anyway would save human resources in the form of both teachers and the remaining students in special classes (Essbach 1985).

The line of exclusion was drawn between so-called 'educable feeble-minded' and the 'uneducable but trainable feeble-minded'. The latter were those with intellectual disabilities. There was more or less no reflection about such labels which "gave a false impression of scientific exactness" (Poore 2007, 258).

Besides, people with an IQ under 20 - diagnosed by a psychiatrist - were counted as 'nursing cases'. They didn't have any rights to education or care. Providing them with basic supplies and care usually took place in the parents' homes, in clerical institutions or mental hospitals. Until the end of the GDR, this group had no relevancy to any field of scientific approach on disability.

To come back to the exclusion of the 'uneducable-trainable feeble-minded' from schools: As I have already mentioned the official version of why they were denied their rights, I will now elaborate on the unofficial reasons. Unofficially the exclusion might have been a result of ideological views as well as economical considerations. The day-care centers were supervised by the Ministry of Health and not the Ministry of People's Education. The reasons for the Ministry of Education's shirking its responsibilities may be based on the following:

1. Contemporary witnesses suspect that none of the political decision makers saw any relevance in teaching children in day-care centers subjects related to socialism and Marxism. The children weren't considered important enough for society (Ines Schönefeldt/ Elke Körner, email from 3/24/2004)
2. Due to their intellectual "impairment", this group wasn't ascribed the ability for radical actions. Nobody regarded them as a threat to the political establishment.
3. Disability, especially intellectual disability, has solely been seen from a medical-psychiatric perspective. Movements towards a sociocultural view on disability, as seen in most Western countries, barely existed. This applied to most socialist countries before the period of change in the early 1990s. It also implies an education focused on medical rehabilitation instead of on a process of social integration.
4. The qualification of teachers was more expensive than of carers. The national budget of the GDR was always under strain.
5. One very important item was the virtual ban of parent-associations and the lack of *any* lobby for people with intellectual disabilities. This hindered a social push towards self-determination, normalization and participation which in comparison was occurring in the West since the late 1970s. This also meant a fundamental lack of innovation for the living conditions of people with intellectual disabilities (Hübner 2000, 169). As compared to the situation today, this is similar to many totalitarian countries whose ideologies are mostly inelastic and emphasize the supposed advantages of their own social system without the need of change influenced from outside lobby-groups.

Nevertheless although officially excluded from schools a very small number of children with intellectual disabilities still had the opportunity to attend special schools depending on the social status and commitment of their parents - despite the proclaimed equality of all citizens in socialism. For them topics like "Hate against the imperialists" and "The love towards the Party" were part of their education.

But the majority was educated in day-care centers. Curriculums there existed since the late 1970s and contained less socialist ideology and more training in elementary skills such as self-help, simple occupational skills, elementary knowledge of the environment as well as social relationships. This was similar to special education provided in other countries but was ahead of most West-German states. Of course they were taught the supremacy of socialism over capitalism and the advantages of socialist humanism for themselves but only to a small degree (GDR's Ministry of Health 1987). However, the aim of education for all citizens in the GDR was the cultivation of the so called "well-rounded, educated, harmoniously developed socialist personality"

Indoctrination wasn't realized in day-care centers only. It happened within families, within residential groups or activities in leisure time. For example, there were "clubs" in many East German cities. They arranged vacation trips, sportive activities and discussions about current political events. Although these clubs were not under official regulation, they were managed by people who themselves often believed in socialist ideology and practice.

With the German reunification in 1990 the western system of education and care was transferred more or less unmodified to the east. Many professionals in the east and some in the west didn't agree but this was ignored in the enthusiasm of reunification.

Disability and socialist theory

I will now give a brief overview on disability in the context of socialist theory. This is not only important for historical interpretation but also for the understanding of the situation in current socialist countries. In relation to the regaining strength of socialism, as can be seen in South America, it will be important for future developments as well.

In the early postwar years there were high hopes to build a better Germany. Ensuing a “growing disillusionment with” the rise of really existing socialism came up early (Poore 2007, xx). Particularly with regard to “Disability”, socialist theory didn't develop a special focus on that topic until the 1990s at the same time as other countries with different social blueprints. Of course many publications postulated the improvement of living conditions for disabled people which came along with socialism. For example in a 1981 text titled “Socialist Humanism and impaired life”:

“Real Humanism is an essential attribute of the socialist society. Highest objective of socialist development is the welfare of man and happiness for all people.” (Körner/ Löther/ Thom 1981, 11)

The same authors then asked what this means for people with “impairments” and answered that it hasn't been an issue of socialist theory at all.

“At best socialist theories mention that being a human is connected with an organism, whose complete and functioning structures and functions are being presupposed.”

A very important element of the socialist ideology is the concept of “performance”.

“With respect to disabled people, the constant emphasis on performance had contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, it served to support efforts to rehabilitate them and get them into the workplace. On the other hand the pressure to perform also had an exclusionary effect on many disabled people who needed extra support or were truly not able to work.” (Poore 2007, 249f.)

Looking at the contemporary arts in the early years of the GDR the worth of performance and health especially for the economic goals is obvious. “Iconic images from this period portray strong, healthy workers [...]. As far as depictions of poverty, disability, or illness among working people or the lower classes were concerned, these occurred only as projections onto the exploitative, inhumane capitalist West.” (Poore 2007, 234)

Another example given by Poore is the GDR writer Führmann, who wrote fairy tales for intellectually disabled patients. “Stasi informants were highly suspicious of these activities, reporting that Führmann was spending time with the feeble-minded [...] and that perhaps he needed to be committed to a psychiatric institution himself.” (2007, 246)

Especially the last example shows the difference between claim and reality. Although there were many efforts to improve the living conditions of intellectually disabled people – and many improvements really happened – there wasn't a push towards emancipation or participation or even more acceptance for disability within the population. In socialist ideology, and in socialism in practice, disabled people always were in an exceptional position. I think even today this is true for many countries with a lack of civic participation and a strong ideological foundation. The stronger they emphasize the advantages of their own ideologies the more they need pitied groups to show their humanism: they need the disabled, the ill and the socially disadvantaged.

Impact of ideological indoctrination

Assuming the proposition that intellectually disabled people who grew up in the GDR might have the same problems with changing their thoughts despite their new living conditions – or even might be less able to – we began a survey, where some ideals and views of this group are being researched, especially those for which surveys of the general population found differences between the eastern and western population.

In 2008 interviews with 165 people between the age of 29 and 65 have been conducted. A group of 117 who grew up in West-Germany was consulted as a reference group. The interviews were mostly conducted in sheltered workshops or within assisted living groups. Interviewers were next to me students of special education and carers.

Method

Measuring attitudes of people with intellectual disabilities towards their past “is not without challenge”. Self-report measures “require long- and short-term memory skills to recall past behaviour” (Hartley/ MacLean 2006).

Resuming the experiences of the interviewers it can be said that some people with ID distinguish knowingly between the systems whereas others distinguished on an emotional base with no further particulars. Some couldn't make a distinction.

The interviewers used questionnaires consisting of Likert-type scales as well as yes/no questions (Hartley/ MacLean 2006; Sigelmann et al. 1980). For most questions there were pictorial representations of response alternatives. There were also open questions. Usually the interviewers weren't the reference persons of the one being interviewed, but in some cases this differed. Some questions, for example questions about preference of political parties, were explained and then completed anonymously.

Results

I will not give you the results to all questions and aspects of the survey but a few examples to illustrate the differences and similarities of East Germans with and without intellectual disabilities as the responses are determined by their historical political system. The research so far on West Germans indicates that there are a few points where a significant difference between the two groups exists. The analyses doesn't divide between age or gender of the surveyed groups.

1. What do you like more: living conditions in the GDR or today (only East)?

GDR: 41%

Today: 19%

No difference: 29%

Indifferent: 11%

2. Do you want to have back the GDR?

Yes: 41%

No: 29%

Indifferent: 26%

Don't know what "GDR" is: 4%

We found out that quite a large number of East Germans with intellectual disabilities is satisfied with both current and past living conditions. More than 1/3 would prefer to have back the GDR which is more or less similar to the response of the general East German population. The interviewers sometimes asked for further details concerning the response, for example "Why do you want to have the GDR back" and vice versa. Responses usually weren't clear but sometimes were explained very specifically, for example: "I'd like to have the GDR back because there were so many parades" or "I don't want the GDR back because Honecker was the worst dictator ever".

We also asked how much the surveyed group identified with the current political system and found out, that 74.5% in the East already participated in a federal, state or local election. 78.6% of the surveyed group in the west participated in an election. For the whole eastern population the 2005 federal election turnout was 74.5% whereas it was 78.5% in the western states². So the values are likely the same.

However nearly half of the East Germans with intellectual disabilities couldn't determine preference for a particular political party. In this case it's a debatable point whether the interviewees didn't have a distinct opinion on political parties or didn't understand the question.

Because right-wing political parties find approximately 20% sympathy in the east (Stöss 2005, 68) we asked the interviewees if they like or dislike foreign people (east and west). The results showed that people with ID in the east

2 http://www.destatis.de/jetspeed/portal/cms/Sites/destatis/Internet/DE/Presse/pk/2006/Repraesentative_Wahlstatistik/State_ment__Hahlen,templateId=renderPrint.psm1

don't dislike foreign people in general. Compared to the people in the west those in the east only show higher reluctance towards foreign people if they don't have contact with them. Taking acquaintanceship with foreign people into account there wasn't a difference between east and west. This is similar to the general population (Blohm/Wasmer 2008).

We also asked about sympathy towards specific countries to find out if concepts of enemies made in the GDR still exist today. This question was sharpened by the request to give preference towards Russia or the United States. The results showed more sympathy with Russia. But nearly half of the interviewees didn't prefer any of both countries: 13% preferred the USA, 32% Russia, for 46% it doesn't matter either way and 9% didn't respond³.

Discussion

The presented results represent only a small sample. But they show that the attitudes and values of the east-German population with ID are very much alike to those of the general east German population. The differences between those who grew up in the socialist east and in the capitalist west suggest the assumption that the effects of socialist education and indoctrination have influence on present identities.

For general Disability History it seems to be important to turn towards disabled people who faced a crucial alteration of social and political conditions as well as the need to focus on those who live in a system very much different from the one in the western world. Although integrating social history, the history of gender, class and race, Disability History is still a historiography written by people living in western societies interpreting events and historical drifts from a western point of view. Essential for Disability History is to encourage historians from countries where approaches like social history and constructivism traditionally do not exist to turn to these topics. For me this is necessary in countries which already faced a dramatic change but also those who have vagrant political systems. These for example are most of the countries of the former Eastern Block and many countries today in Africa or South America.

Another challenge for Disability History is to improve methods for the research of the history of people with intellectual disabilities. Most approaches today are done by the interpretation of external factors like political and institutional conditions. Some interpretations build on selected case-studies with an emphasis on people with borderline or mild intellectual disabilities. But I think there is the need to look at the history of people with all type of ID including those with so-called "severe" and "profound" disabilities. While for general Disability Studies "it has become increasingly common to interview people with intellectual disabilities as part of research studies" (Perry 2004, 115) this is still very rare in historical interpretation. Of course this is a result of the already mentioned difficulties with self-report measurements of past behavior of this group (Hartley/ MacLean 2006, 814). But the

3 There are no direct results for the similar question for the east-German population. But it was found out that among the total German population the favorable opinion of the US decreased from 78% in 1999/2000 to 41% in 2005 (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 5).

inclusion of self-reports of this group is essential to avoid writing history about people with ID without involving them and their memories, their ideas and their views. This is our future task.

More detailed results can be found here (in german):

- http://www.avbstiftung.de/fileadmin/projekte/LP_AvB_Barsch_Sebastian_01.pdf
- http://www.avbstiftung.de/fileadmin/projekte/Barsch_V2_090521.pdf

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