

**A relational concept of inclusion. Critical perspectives**

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**Abstract**

The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) underlines the status of inclusion as a human right. In this context, inclusion means being involved in society, and people being acknowledged whatever their abilities and needs. The article gives an insight into the international debate on inclusion, and the discussion and state of implementation in Germany. It advocates a relational concept of inclusion making use of an “agency-vulnerability nexus”. Just like the human rights understanding of inclusion, relational theories of agency and vulnerability examine the processes in social environments which enable or hinder agency. They focus on professional practice, the organisational structures of social services, political conditions and social discourse (for example on disability or refugeeism) and how they are relevant to subjective scopes of action. A perspective of this kind has inherent potential with regard to social criticism, and this is indispensable for a debate which understands inclusion as a task to be tackled by society as a whole.

**Keywords:** inclusion, relational inclusion, integration, separation, social work, special needs education, participation, agency, vulnerability

**1. Introduction**

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), a global organisation for social workers and social work organisations, considers the aim of social work to be “social change and development, social cohesion and the empowerment and liberation of people”. The principles of “social justice”, “collective responsibility and respect for diversities” are central

## Papers of Social Pedagogy 1/11, 2019: 60-76

to social work (IFSW, 2014). The profession aims to help people cope with life and facilitate their social, economic, cultural and political participation (Böhnisch, 2016). As such, social work fundamentally sees itself as supporting inclusion as a current underlying all social action, based on human rights (Dannenbeck, 2014). A human rights understanding of inclusion, as laid out in the Salamanca Statement of 1994 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted in 2006, means people having full social participation and recognition whatever their abilities and needs, their age, their physical and mental condition, their sexual identity, their gender, their nationality or their world view. Inclusion thus boils down to the socio-political task of creating conditions under which everyone can participate. The ratification of the CRPD by the signatory states places responsibility for implementing inclusion back in the hands of the various countries.

Social inequality means that different people have different opportunities for participating in society. Capitalist, heteronormative and patriarchal social structures themselves constantly create exclusion. There are also different ideas of how professional practice, policies and organisational structures within the social services should be designed so as to actually expand service users' scope of action (Oehme, 2014). This poses a paradox: social work cannot treat inclusion as a given, but instead has to work to introduce inclusion into exclusionary social structures, to change social environments and to facilitate participation by people who have differing life histories and are starting out in different situations (Köttig, 2017: 35–36).

This contribution<sup>1</sup> offers an insight into the international debate on inclusion (2.). It outlines trends in the discourse in Germany and takes up the controversies arising between supporters and sceptics of the human rights understanding of inclusion (3.). It emphasises the importance of a (self-)reflective attitude in the context of the inclusion approach, as a task that spans society, and critically examines categorisation processes and established organisational structures (4.). Finally, it proposes a relational understanding of inclusion from the perspective of an “agency-vulnerability nexus”, to provide theoretical support for the socio-critical potential of a human-rights-based definition of inclusion. This places the *social production* of agency and vulnerability under the microscope. This understanding aims to

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<sup>1</sup> My heartfelt thanks go to Jan Wienforth for the fertile discussion about this contribution.

identify opportunities for and barriers to participation from the actors' point of view, and to create accessible environments (5.). The conclusion sums up the key arguments (6).

### **2. The international debate on inclusion**

The term “inclusion” became known within the debate on education in North America at the end of the 1980s. At the time, people who were considered disabled, and their relatives and supporters, were calling for people with and without special educational needs to attend school together, and for schools' structure to be changed. In the USA, this discussion replaced the hitherto commonly used term “mainstreaming”. Since the mid-1990s, discussion in the UK has also been about inclusion, rather than integration, the term used previously (Biewer, Schütz, 2016: 123). The principle of inclusive education is laid down in the 1994 Salamanca Statement by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The background is a conference in Salamanca jointly organised by the UNESCO and the Spanish government, which was attended by 92 governments and 25 international organisations. In the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the participants reaffirm their concerns: “schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups” (ibid.: 6). The statement calls for an education system without barriers. Finally, by adopting the CRPD, the United Nations elevated inclusion to the status of a human right, and extended the aim of inclusion beyond the education system. The convention represents a paradigm shift from an individualist, medical understanding of disability to a model based on human rights which sees disability as a barrier to participation, and people with a disability as subjects with rights. Article 1 describes the purpose of the convention: “to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.” The convention consistently refers to the intersection between disability and other axes of difference such as gender, migration or age. It is based on an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1994) starting out from the categorisation “disability”.

A controversial debate on inclusion has been sparked not just in social work, but also in the educational sciences and special needs education. Inclusion is defined more broadly or more narrowly in different contexts, depriving the term of some of its theoretical and political clout. Between 2004 and 2012, Göransson and Nilholm (2014) investigated peer-reviewed journal articles to explore their understanding and use of the term “inclusion”. Based on their analysis, they distinguish between four understandings: “(1) inclusion as the placement of pupils with disabilities in mainstream classrooms; (2) inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of pupils with disabilities; (3) inclusion as meeting the social/academic needs of all pupils; (4) inclusion as the creation of communities” (ibid.: 268). Depending on how narrow or broad the understanding of inclusion is, different aspects come into view. In the case of a human rights understanding, those aspects are the opportunities for and barriers to participation in social organisations and policy. This perspective is alien to the first two understandings, considering their primary focus on individual schoolchildren in the specific setting of the school.

### **3. From integration to inclusion? Trends and gaps in the German discourse on inclusion**

The lack of any unified concept of inclusion can also be found in the professional discourse in Germany. Germany ratified the CRPD on 26 March 2009. The German translation of the CRPD included in the ratification was heavily criticised by associations and academics. In several places, the central concept of “inclusion” is translated as “integration”. This translation waters down the critical aspect of the convention (Degener, 2009).

The controversial debate in Germany is substantially shaped by the differences and connections made between the terms *Integration* and *Inklusion*. Before the ratification of the CRPD, the term *Inklusion* was mainly used in systems theory<sup>2</sup> (Luhmann, 1995). The approach of *Integration* is fundamental to social work and goes back a long time, having been used both in the disability movement of the 1960s and 1970s and in the field of migration-related educational science. The fundamental task of social work is not just to support people in their lifeworlds, but also always to *adapt* them to social notions of normality; that is, to

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<sup>2</sup> Systems theory assumes that there are social function systems such as the labour market or the education system which can include or exclude people. Luhmann's theory deals with the autopoiesis of social systems. It follows an analytical approach, rather than a normative one like the human rights understanding of inclusion.

integrate them into societal reference systems such as the labour market, with its ideas of, for example, “good work ethics” or flexibility. This balancing act is described as social work’s “dual mandate”. It inherently entails fundamental contradictions and paradoxes.

Andreas Hinz (2004) contrasts integration and inclusion, pointing out how different the two paradigms are. He sees the fundamental idea of integration as that of bringing people (e.g. with disabilities or a background of migration) *in line* with existing systems. The reference systems used in integration suggest that there are specific notions of what constitutes normal human behaviour and existence, which people need to be “adapted” to. Integration remains locked in two-group thinking (with/without disabilities, native/foreigner, normal/different) and centres on the individual. It is individuals who have to be adapted to existing structures – e.g. mainstream schooling – enabling them to fit in. This takes the form, for example, of “integration assistants” being appointed to help children learn at school. This understanding differs from inclusion, which is a human right with a mission to change social environments so that everyone can participate in them as they see fit. Inclusion starts out from the idea that human heterogeneity is normal, takes a critical stance on ideas about what is “normal” or “different” and aims to make organisations and policies inclusive. Inclusion is thus understood as a reaction to social inequality.

This ideal-type dichotomisation of integration and inclusion has been both adopted and criticised in the German-speaking context. Critics of this contrasting view explain that the integration approach already takes into account changing organisational structures, and ultimately aims to use integration to achieve inclusion.

### **3.1 Special needs education in a state of conflict**

With its demand to integrate people with disabilities into mainstream schools, the integration movement drew attention to various forms of exclusion. In Germany, the separation of people with disabilities in special schools<sup>3</sup>, and in special institutions outside of school such as residential homes and workshops, has a firm institutional basis (Loeken, Windisch, 2013). In

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<sup>3</sup> In German, “special school” is translated either as *Förderschule* or *Sonderschule* (referring to the same institution). The former comes from the verb *fördern*, to support or promote, the latter from *sondern*, to separate or distinguish. The former underlines the aim of supporting people in line with their special educational needs, the latter refers to the fact that children in special schools are separated institutionally from those in mainstream schools. Whether or not children at *Förderschulen* actually receive sufficient support remains open to question, as empirical studies show (Pfahl, 2014).

## Papers of Social Pedagogy 1/11, 2019: 60-76

academia, future teachers study special needs education to work in special schools or special needs institutions outside of school. However, professional social workers are also employed in these fields of work.

In Germany, special needs education is an independent sub-discipline of educational science, and has been in a state of conflict since it first developed (Oehme, 2014: 34). It aims to support people with disabilities in special facilities, providing them with a safe, protective space. However, in doing so it plays a role in excluding people with disabilities from mainstream social structures. In the 1960s, the number of special needs schools shot up, followed only a short time later by criticism of children being separated into different systems, voiced by the integration movement. In 1974, the German Bundesrat's committee on education published recommendations on the educational support of children with disabilities or at risk of developing them. This was the first official document in Germany to oppose the separation of children with disabilities. The recommendation was significantly influenced by politically active parents and supporters. They questioned the idea of people with disabilities learning and living separately, and lobbied for joint kindergarten attendance and integrative schooling. People with severe cognitive impairment were still excluded from schooling until the 1970s. In the 1980s, the campaign led to integrative pilot schemes, but this did not have any wide-reaching effect. Even today, Germany is still a long way from nationwide integration either in or out of school. Martin Sassenroth (2012) thus describes the integration movement as a "transitional stage". It has created a situation where integrative and separatist organisations exist alongside one another. People considered to have complex disabilities are often still at a disadvantage. Most live in homes. In education, there is a parallel structure of special needs and mainstream schools. A recent report on the status of school inclusion reveals that developments in inclusion have yielded only meagre results (Klemm, 2018: 17). In the 2008/2009 school year, of a total of 7,992,315 children in Years 1 to 9/10 (primary and lower secondary), 393,491 children attended a special school. In the 2016/2017 school year, out of 7,334,333 pupils, 318,002 children were taught in special schools (ibid.: 9). The exclusion rate, measured as the proportion of pupils with special needs at separate special schools, out of all children attending primary school and lower secondary education, dropped only marginally, by 0.6 percentage points, from 4.9 to 4.3 per cent. At the same time, the exclusion rate differs from one federal state to another. In Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, there were actually more children attending special schools in the

2016/2017 school year than in the 2008/2009 school year (ibid.: 10). Empirical studies have determined that pupils in special schools are socially stigmatised, and that the performance gap between them and pupils in mainstream schools increases the longer they stay at a special school (Pfahl, 2014: 276). It is not uncommon for people classified as disabled to follow an “institutional career” spanning all ages and life stages: from special kindergartens and special schools to workshops for disabled people and residential homes (Frühauf, 2012: 16). Despite these findings, some special needs teachers still defend the special education system, seeing it as a safe haven. They express the concern that people in need of support would not get the help they need in an inclusive support environment (Felder, Schneiders, 2018), and are afraid that their discipline will be lost altogether.

While the integration movement arose thanks to the involvement of those concerned and the professional community, the context changed upon the ratification of the CRPD. Germany has undertaken to incorporate the principles of the CRPD into national law. Whether or not mainstream social and educational services open their doors no longer depends on individual activism; now, it is legally binding. Under the Convention, the separation of pupils with special educational needs is a human rights violation (Pfahl, 2012: 417).

### **3.2 People with a background of migration and refugeeism: excluded from the debate on inclusion**

It is not only the debate on special needs education that is characterised by a shift from a paradigm of integration to one of inclusion: the same applies to the debate on migration-related educational science in Germany. Like “disability”, “migration” is considered a social problem in the political discourse (Wansing, Westphal, 2014: 35). Alongside this understanding, there are also perspectives that recognise disability and migration as a normal part of diverse societies. Despite the desire for inclusion, people with disabilities are often still indiscriminately presumed to be in need of help and lacking ability. By contrast, people with a background of migration are required to “plausibly” prove their need for help, for example based on their experience as refugees, to the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), and are often treated with mistrust. Their flight from one country to another is treated as illegal (Castro Varela, Dhawan, 2016). They are expected “first to explain themselves” and “then to integrate themselves”. In immigration policy, the debate on integration is driven by the neo-liberal principle of supporting people while also demanding

## Papers of Social Pedagogy 1/11, 2019: 60-76

that they make an effort (“Fördern und Fordern”). It distinguishes between those who are “willing” to integrate and those who “refuse” (Castro Varela, 2008). Being dichotomised in this way leads to practical consequences for people’s lives. If, for example, they want to stay longer, or permanently, in Germany, they have to offer proof of the efforts they have made to integrate, such as being able to speak German and earn their own way, and having attended integration courses (Westphal, Wansing, 2019: 12). Belonging is not immediate for people with experience of migration. They have to fight to stay in Germany, justify it and actually “earn” a belonging that is considered legitimate. In this respect, the paradigm of integration that is prevalent in migration policy is worlds apart from an understanding of inclusion meaning *participation in* (nationally granted) *participation rights* (Janotta, 2018: 123). The discourse on integration inherently has huge potential for division insofar as it actually produces, then perpetuates, the figure of the “Other” and an “us” that is understood as static. In the past, people with experience of migration were long conceptualised as an exception to the norm. It is only since the start of the 2000s that Germany has acknowledged its position as a nation of immigrants; an *Einwanderungsland*. Even into the 1990s, the social services only occasionally tackled the reality of a migration society, mainly reacting to the migration that was taking place in the form of homogenisation and separation. At first, the children of immigrant “guest workers” were not allowed to attend school; later, depending on which federal state they lived in, they mainly went to separate schools. In the 1970s, “advice centres” for non-German nationals were set up. Families and children were expected to adjust to imagined “German norms and values” and the German language. They were (and still are) often indiscriminately accused of not following democratic values and, for instance, not recognising the principle of gender equality. Their respective experiences of socialisation and resources, such as speaking languages other than German, were seen as a deficit, instead of deserving recognition. In the 1980s, intercultural education concepts were designed with the aim of encouraging the non-migrant population to accept the new arrivals. Criticism grew of the way foreign nationals had been educated up to that point. In the 1990s, the discourse began to focus both on migrants’ disadvantages and on how migration was a task that spans society (Mecheril, 2010: 56-57). At present, migration-related educational science is receiving increased attention within society due to the influx of refugees from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Post-migrational perspectives call for the dualistic division into “us and them” to be abandoned and for people’s multiple belongings, experiences of migration and

flexible ways of living to be recognised, without trivialising any of the suffering experienced during flight or through experiences of being excluded (Hill, Yıldız, 2018).

With the ratification of the CRPD and the discussion on inclusion in special needs education, research into migration and refugeeism is now also increasingly drawing upon a human rights-based understanding of inclusion and calling for a critical approach in that discourse to the social exclusion of people who have experienced migration and refugeeism (Yıldız, 2015). Political practice must be distinguished from the academic debate. A policy of separation can be seen in restrictive asylum laws, the establishment of exclusionary shared housing for refugees and defamatory discourses which indiscriminately place all refugees under suspicion of being terrorists, violent criminals or a threat to “Western” values. These policies run counter to the simultaneous discussion on inclusion. They show clearly which people or groups of people are considered part of the discourse on inclusion, and which are denied the right to inclusion, as excluded subjects. The old and new mechanisms of exclusion which are in use underline the fact that inclusion demands more than just the transformation of the organisational structures of education, the social services or the labour market. A central focus of the debate is *careful reflection on who is seen as belonging to a society, who is enabled to participate, and who is excluded from it.*

#### **4. (Self-)reflective inclusion. A task that spans society**

Germany currently presents a very mixed bag of efforts towards inclusion. Young refugees in Germany, for example, can be found living in segregated communal accommodation, in newly built special facilities or in integrative institutions within the child welfare system, alongside children who are not refugees. What type of accommodation and support they are offered depends both on the young people’s age (under or over 18) and whether they entered the country with or without a legal guardian. In the education system, mainstream schools and special needs schools exist alongside one another. Depending on the region where they live, schoolchildren can choose from a different number of school types. Unlike countries such as Canada, inclusive education is still the exception rather than the rule (Köpfer, 2014). Outside school, in fields such as leisure facilities, housing or work, the level of inclusion is also still low. The fact that all organisations need to open their doors – all social services and authorities – makes it clear that inclusion is a *task spanning society and education.* This issue is highlighted in Germany by the two major professional associations for educational science

## Papers of Social Pedagogy 1/11, 2019: 60-76

and social work – the German Educational Research Association (DGfE) and the German Association of Social Work (DGSA) (DGfE, 2015; Spatscheck, Thiessen, 2017). Social work or special needs education cannot act alone. When we talk about inclusion, it is always about educational science as a whole; about how inclusion is incorporated into social policy, and about comprehensive, self-critical reflection on inclusive and exclusionary social mechanisms. A central part of this is questioning the established pedagogical “responsibilities for specific groups of clients” (Köbsell, Pfahl, 2015). In Germany, for instance, support for people with disabilities is institutionally separated from the child welfare services, the two having their foundations in separate organisations and legislature. For many years, there has been discussion about establishing a single set of child welfare services, for all young people, but this has not yet been put into practice (Oehme, Schröer, 2018). The relevance of re-examining the institutional and legal situation can also be seen at the point where “physical and psychological constitution” and “migration” overlap: until now, there has been insufficient research into the needs of refugees and migrants with physical and/or psychological impairments, and these aspects have not been taken into sufficient account in the support provided in pedagogical practice (Westphal, Wansing, 2019). The discourse on inclusion is still often related to one single categorisation, without considering how that is interlinked with other categorisations. Consequently, Budde and Hummrich (2014) call for inclusion to be “reflective”, meaning that interconnections between categorisations should be made visible, along with their associated disadvantages, while implicit norms are deconstructed rather than being established. The authors argue in favour of a broad concept of inclusion, extending beyond differentiating approaches and tapping the “full potential of addressing both sides of the inclusion/exclusion coin” (ibid.: n. pag.). This brings social exclusion and social inequality based on those categorisations into the centre of the debate, as fundamental societal problems. Häcker and Walm (2015: 84) differentiate between three levels on which reflection is required. Firstly, on the level of pedagogical interaction, it is important to identify and avoid exclusionary practices and to reflect on culturalising and classifying constructions of difference. Secondly, on an organisational level, the effects of rules and procedures need to be questioned: do they have exclusionary effects? How could they be made inclusive? Thirdly, on a macro level, the task is to identify fundamental social contradictions and inequalities. To professionals, for instance, an inclusive approach appears paradoxical in a school system that is intrinsically selective. Meanwhile, social workers

dealing with young refugees face the highly ambivalent task of planning their support while their residency status is uncertain.

### 5. Relational inclusion, agency and vulnerability

Until now, those with a narrow understanding of inclusion primarily see people with disabilities as the target group for efforts to increase inclusion. They see “disability” not as a categorisation, but as an individual disposition that requires special support. The central means of classification into “disorders” is diagnosis. This is used to determine the support plans designed to “adapt” individuals to social environments such as a mainstream school. Inclusion fundamentally differs from this paradigm; it aims not to change individuals, but to make social environments inclusive. This is an undertaking which hinges on a large number of conditions, and requires basic funding and political support to prevent situations in which people are actively *dis-abled*. Here, disability means being unable to participate in society due to barriers originating not in the individual but in discriminative organisational structures and practices. Hendrik Trescher (2018) introduced this *relational understanding of disability* into the professional debate. Relational theories have gained momentum in the social sciences and cultural studies in recent years. They take a critical stance on essentialist theories from different epistemological positions (Altissimo et al., 2018). Leaning on Michel Foucault, Trescher (2018) understands disability as a social practice and a form of discursive exclusion. Rather than having a medicinal understanding, he does not view disability as a natural form of difference (ibid.: 6), but instead asks how disabled subjects are produced in discourses. Here, disability means not being able to assume the role of a speaker in discourses; not being recognised, and being labelled as “different” based on ascribed traits. This leads to people being excluded from the group of those whose voices are heard within society. Trescher's relational understanding thus also reveals the disability of subjects who do not fall into that category in the popular discourse, such as refugees, for example if they are denied access to language courses or the labour market. Disability is understood as a situation: it is not absolute. Trescher accompanies this *relational understanding of disability* with a *relational understanding of inclusion*. Here, inclusion means the process of deconstructing barriers to participation in the discourse, and is not restricted to any individual categorisation.

This relational view can be further narrowed down using the perspectives on agency and vulnerability found in social work. *Relational perspectives on agency* see people neither as

## Papers of Social Pedagogy 1/11, 2019: 60-76

socially determined nor as fully autonomous (Raithelhuber, 2016). They investigate how agency is enabled or prevented in social processes. At the same time, a *relational understanding of vulnerability* does not categorise people as vulnerable by nature, but instead examines how vulnerability is created in particular living situations and affects people's scope for action – for example, by means of exclusionary laws or by refugees being forced to live in shared housing with no privacy or protection against sexual assault. Simone Danz (2014) introduces the significance of vulnerability into the educational debate, problematising the practice of equating disability with being in need, incomplete or not normal (ibid.: 62). She sees this act of offloading humanity's shared vulnerability onto the group of people with disabilities as connected to the popular idea of what is normal: an effective, constantly improving individual. The neo-liberal discourse on the “entrepreneurial self” excludes human vulnerability from its ideology (Bröckling, 2007). Vulnerability becomes a social position that is coded as abnormal. If, on the other hand, we understand vulnerability not as an individual “deficit”, but as a basic anthropological constant that arises in exclusionary relations, discourses, organisational structures and policies, we can examine its production critically. With regard to inclusion, that means *identifying and breaking down social environments that generate vulnerability and continually working to create enabling environments*. Just like the human rights understanding of inclusion, relational theories of agency and vulnerability examine the *processes in social environments which enable or hinder people* (Orgocka, Clark-Kaznak, 2012). On one hand, an “agency-vulnerability nexus” (Schmitt, 2019) can be used to counter fears that the debate on inclusion will overemphasise people's autonomy and overlook their needs; the fears of positions primarily focussing on people's *vulnerability*. On the other hand, it can also counter positions which acknowledge people's agency and resources, and thus potentially overlook situations where they may be damaged by their social environment. The basic thesis is that it is not enough to view actors solely from the point of view of vulnerability, but neither does it appear helpful solely to focus on their anticipated agency. Rather, vulnerability and agency should be reflected upon as two sides of the same coin in terms of their significance for a relational understanding of inclusion. The central question is then *how agency and vulnerability are generated in organisational structures, in professional practice, in political decision-making and in social discourses (for example on disability or refugeeism)*. This perspective can potentially address the theme of the changes required to give people agency, and call for politics to take responsibility. Relational inclusion especially highlights the fact that simply making social services inclusive does not

automatically lead to an inclusive society, and cannot replace inclusive social policy. People's lifeworlds are shaped not only by organisations such as their school or workplace, but also, equally, by their social background or socio-economic situation (Oehme, 2014: 33–35). If it is to retain its socio-critical potential, inclusion cannot be limited to specific settings: it needs to be discussed by society as a whole. The thought is that a relational perspective on inclusion, seen from the point of view of agency and vulnerability, can provide a framework for socio-critical reflection on this point: it spotlights processes of social enablement and social inequality as experienced by actors, and identifies what socio-political action needs to be taken. We generally understand social policy as being organised by the nation state. If, however, we examine the doorways and barriers to inclusion from the subjects' point of view, that outlook extends well beyond the borders of individual nation states. A relational perspective on inclusion does not stop at state borders, but instead reveals the barriers to inclusion and opportunities for participation that exist in transnational spaces. It can consider “transnational inclusion” (Amelina, 2010) as a subjective aspiration and an organisational and political challenge that is becoming increasingly relevant. It can ask how inclusion and self-determination can be made possible in the lifeworlds of people who move between several nation-state systems, such as refugees with a precarious residency status, sans-papiers or circular migrants (Raithelhuber, Sharma, Schröer, 2018).

### **6. Conclusion**

The social production of inclusion and critical engagement with issues of social inequality is a genuine component not only of social work, but also of educational science as a whole. Inclusion is a collective task that goes to the core of educational action. If social work is to take its responsibility seriously, it must enter into a dialogue with other disciplines and subdisciplines, and cast a critical eye on established responsibilities, organisational structures and categorisation processes with regard to their inclusive or exclusionary potential. Inclusion is not only the responsibility of social work and education; rather, it raises the fundamental question of how to break down exclusionary practices, discourses and policies. A process of this kind calls for both the reorganisation and rethinking of professional expertise in education and socio-political responsibility to provide the basic conditions required for inclusion to take place at all. This contribution has shown that inclusion is seen sometimes narrowly, in relation to the group of people classified as having disabilities, and sometimes as the generation of participation for any marginalised group of people. To make sure that the human rights-based

understanding of inclusion, with its socio-critical elements, is not watered down, it needs to have a firm basis in reflection. This contribution has proposed a *relational understanding of inclusion that discusses fundamental aspects of barriers to participation without being limited to individual categorisations, and is enriched with the relational perspectives of agency and vulnerability*. Relational inclusion from the perspective of the theory of agency and vulnerability focuses on identifying and eliminating barriers to participation, as well as on subjective needs and vulnerabilities that require educational support and can be understood as socially evoked. This perspective thus acts as a link between those views which, by focusing on environmental barriers, run the risk of overlooking people's vulnerabilities, and those views which, by categorising people as "disabled", might seem to pay too little attention to subjective expressions of agency and the relevance of social environments. A relational perspective on inclusion is not limited either to individual nation states or to individual categorisations or organisations, such as the school. It sees inclusion as a task that falls to society as a whole. Inclusion cannot be achieved without a fundamental discussion on social inequality and socio-political involvement. Equally, the discourse must involve the viewpoints of the subjects of this debate, and enable them to participate in it.

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## Papers of Social Pedagogy 1/11, 2019: 60-76

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