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INTRODUCTION

Exploring the History of Pupils with Disabilities in Welfare States

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As European welfare states took shape during the first half of the twentieth century – particularly in the aftermath of the First World War and more decisively following the Second – the role of the state in securing minimum standards of living became increasingly institutionalised. Across Western Europe, governments assumed responsibility for social provisions, encompassing education, healthcare, and social security, typically financed through taxation. While the general principles of social endowments were widely shared – their function was to mitigate the consequences of industrial society for the wage-earning classes – the development of welfare regimes exhibited significant geographical variation.[1] In the Nordic countries, the welfare state was closely associated with ideals of social equality and universalism, whereas continental European models often reflected more conservative or corporatist traditions.[2]

Within this broader context, different countries developed specific education regimes. In Northern Europe, a "Nordic model of education" developed that was characterised by a strong commitment to universalism, egalitarianism, and strong state governance. Here, education was conceived as an integral part of the welfare state, aimed at promoting social cohesion, equal opportunities, and democratic participation. Comprehensive schooling systems replaced earlier segregated and parallel structures, and public education was expanded to ensure access for all children, regardless of social background.[3] In England, the post-war education system was formally committed to equality of opportunity yet remained marked by sorting mechanisms such as the tripartite system, which reinforced class divisions. In countries such as Germany and France, education was often shaped by corporatist or conservative welfare models, characterised by early tracking, selective secondary schooling, and a strong role for church or private providers alongside the state. Southern European systems, meanwhile, tended

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[1] On the mitigating functions of welfare states, see esp. Asa Briggs, "The Welfare State in Historical Perspective," *European Journal of Sociology* 2, no. 2 (1961), 221–58.

[2] Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990).

[3] Alfred Oftedal Telhaug, Odd Asbjørn Mediås, and Petter Aasen, "The Nordic Model in Education: Education as Part of the Political System in the Last 50 Years," *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 50, no. 3 (2006), 245–83.

to be more centralised and slower to expand access, with persistent inequalities linked to region and class. In contrast to the comprehensive and universalist approach of the Nordic countries, these systems frequently maintained differentiated pathways, which influenced both access to and the outcomes of education for various social groups.[4] The history of education for children with disabilities unfolded in the shadow of these welfare state formations.

For a long time, children with disabilities occupied a marginal position in both the history of education and welfare state historiography. Since the early 2000s, the educational history of children with disabilities has emerged as a distinct and expanding subfield within the broader history of education. This growing body of research has attracted increasing scholarly attention, reflecting a wider interest in the intersections of education, disability, and social policy. Disability studies have played a crucial role in reframing historical narratives, particularly through the development of the social model of disability. This model, which distinguishes between impairment and the disabling effects of social structures, has informed a wave of historical research that interrogates the institutional and ideological foundations of exclusion. Catherine Kudlik's influential article "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other'" called for a more nuanced and inclusive historiography, while scholars such as Kim Nielsen have demonstrated the centrality of disability to broader narratives of nation-building and social reform.[5]

Drawing on cultural and social history, disability studies and educational historiography, researchers have outlined the history of children with disabilities within educational and state systems. But the educational experiences of children with disabilities remain comparatively under-explored in the history of education, and especially that vein of historiography that centres on political history and the history of state formation.

In their introduction to the themed issue "Gaining Momentum," editors Pieter Verstraete, Maria Romeiras Amado, and Carlos Manique position the volume as a deliberate intervention in two flourishing but historically disconnected fields: disability history and the history of education. Despite earlier efforts – such as the 2005 special issue in *History of Education* and the 2012 ISCHE conference – these fields have largely remained in a "Living Apart Together" relationship.[6] The same argument, we advance, can be made for the fields of welfare state history and the educational history of children with disabilities.

There are several compelling reasons to direct scholarly attention to the intersection of welfare state formation, disability and education. Investigating the schooling of

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[4] Marius R. Busemeyer and Rita Nikolai, "Education," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State*, ed. Francis G. Castles, Stephan Leibfried, Jane Lewis, Herbert Obinger, and Christopher Pierson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 494–508; Glen O'Hara, "Planning the Education System in the Post-War Era," in *Governing Post-War Britain: The Paradoxes of Progress*, ed. Glen O'Hara (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 187–210.

[5] Catherine J. Kudlick, "Disability History: Why We Need Another 'Other'," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3 (2003), 763–93; Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

[6] Pieter Verstraete, Maria Romeiras Amado, and Carlos Manique, "Paedagogica Historica Themed Issue: Gaining Momentum – New Cultural Histories of Education and Disability," *Paedagogica Historica* 60, no. 4 (2024), 587–91.

children with disabilities not only illuminates their educational experiences but also offers valuable insights into the historical development of state institutions and their modes of governance. Such studies reveal how, for instance, different welfare states over time have conceptualised disability, constructed educational provision, and negotiated the boundaries between education, care, control, and citizenship. In this respect, the history of education for children with disabilities becomes a lens through which broader changes in government administration and social policy can be examined.[7]

We can zoom in on one illustrative example. When the welfare state is discussed, Gøsta Esping-Andersen's theory of welfare regimes is frequently invoked. In his influential work *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* Esping-Andersen proposed a typology of welfare regimes that categorises advanced capitalist democracies into three ideal types. This classification is based on the degree of decommodification, patterns of social stratification, and the interaction between the state, the market, and the family in the provision and distribution of welfare. Firstly, there are liberal regimes, secondly, conservative or corporatist regimes, and thirdly, social democratic regimes, such as the Nordic countries, prioritise universalism, equality and a high degree of decommodification, and promote comprehensive social rights as part of citizenship.[8] While Esping-Andersen's typology has been widely cited it has also been the subject of sustained critique. A central criticism concerns the lack of a historical explanatory framework. His model is largely descriptive and static, offering a snapshot of welfare regime configurations without sufficiently addressing their historical development, including the influence of political coalitions, class struggles, and institutional legacies. Two additional critiques are particularly relevant to the theme of this special issue. First, the typology excludes Southern and Eastern European welfare states, which often do not fit neatly into the three ideal types. Second, and most pertinent to this issue's focus, the model has been criticised for its gender and normality biases. As Christoph Tschanz argues, Esping-Andersen's framework centres on the "normal," able-bodied male worker as the default welfare subject, thereby neglecting the structural position and specific needs of people with disabilities.[9] This is but one example of how disability history can make us rethink theoretical models.

The educational history of children with disabilities can also make us rethink periodisation and rationalities of discipline and power in the history of education. During the period stretching from the late eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, children with disabilities were placed in self-sufficient institutions where care, school and work – the entire life cycle – were lived out in these isolated premises. They were managed and cared for according to the logic of an institutional paradigm. The paradigm aligned with the broader technologies of power characteristic of bourgeois society – its normalizing power techniques and its desire to place people of different class,

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[7] This argument on disability policy and the experiences of disabled people as an analytical lens for broader considerations on the welfare state is inspired by Maria Björkman, "The Cost of Normalization: The Thalidomide Affected and the Welfare State," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 48, no. 3 (2022), 341–58.

[8] Esping-Andersen (1990).

[9] Christoph Tschanz, "Disability Care Services Between Welfare Regime Pre-conditioning and Emancipatory Change to Independent Living: A Comparison of 10 European Cases with Fuzzy Set Ideal-Type Analysis." *ALTER – European Journal of Disability Research* 16, no. 4 (2022), 53–72.

gender and abilities in different parallel universes.[10] The logic of state policy during this period was grounded in separation, exclusion, and the isolation of children categorised as different. The emergence of specialised institutions for children with disabilites – such as institutions for the blind, deaf, lame and those labelled as "feebleminded" – reflected broader processes of severance, underscored by medicalisation and bipolarisation. These institutions were often framed as philanthropic, emphatic or progressive, yet they also served to segregate and regulate disabled bodies within the expanding bureaucratic apparatus of the modern state.[11] Scholars such as David Wright have shown how the rise of "idiot asylums" in Britain was closely tied to the development of state-sponsored welfare and the consolidation of medical authority.[12] Similarly, Anne Borsay's *Disability and Social Policy in Britain since 1750* has traced the shifting boundaries between care, control, and education in the treatment of disabled people against the background of industrialisation, medicalisation and social policies.[13]

During the post-war period, the traditional institutional system began to be reformed and dismantled. New political frames urging for integration, normalisation, inclusion, equal opportunity, and impaired children's rights to education and work, spread across Europe.[14] How can we characterise what came after the institutional paradigm? Perhaps we can speak of an integration paradigm, as more and more children were demonstrably transferred from institutions to the ordinary school system. But at the same time, it is problematic to borrow labels from the policy documents of the time. The post-war period however marked a turning point in both the provision and conceptualisation of education for disabled children. The consolidation of welfare states brought new resources and ambitions for universal provision, yet educational programmes remained uneven and contested regarding children with disabilities. The uneven experience of war and conflict, to name one factor, influenced the state policy on disabled children and adults. Deborah Cohen highlights how Britain as well as Germany grappled with the reintegration of disabled veterans – a process that influenced broader debates and policies about disability and citizenship.[15] Notwithstanding the rhetoric of universality and equal opportunity, the actual reform and implementation of educational provision for children with intellectual, physical or mobility disabilities seem to have varied considerably across European countries, shaped by shifting

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[10] Johanna Ringarp, "Institutional Care and Education: Circulation of Knowledge About Epilepsy in Sweden 1915–40," *Medical History* 68, no. 3 (2024), 325–40; Anne Berg, "Mobility Disability, Education and the Welfare State: Policy-Making and the Integration of Children with Mobility Disabilities into the Public School System in Post-War Sweden," *History of Education* (online first, 2025).

[11] Thomas Barow, "Undesirable Citizens: Education, Care and Control of the 'Feeble-Minded' in the Swedish Province of Malmöhus, 1900–1950," *ALTER – European Journal of Disability Research* 5, no. 2 (2011), 104–15.

[12] David Wright, *Mental Disability in Victorian England: The Earlswood Asylum 1847–1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[13] Anne Borsay, *Disability and Social Policy in Britain Since 1750: A History of Exclusion* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[14] Lise Vislie, "From Integration to Inclusion: Focusing Global Trends and Changes in the Western European Countries," *European Journal of Special Needs Education* 18, no. 2 (2003), 17–35.

[15] Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2001).

medical, pedagogical, and social policy frameworks.[16] The post-war decades also saw significant transformations in how disability was understood and addressed within welfare states. Medical models, which framed disability primarily as a deficit to be treated or managed, coexisted with emerging sociological approaches that emphasised individual potential and social integration. At the same time, parents and advocacy groups began to challenge exclusionary practices and demand educational rights for their children, contributing to gradual shifts in policy and provision.

Welfare societies' handling of disabled children's schooling is still difficult to grasp and synthesise if we want to go beyond the concepts of the time. Our knowledge remains limited regarding how processes of integration, inclusion, or mainstreaming of pupils with disabilities were implemented across different state systems, and what material and discursive conditions shaped their outcomes. Against this background, this special issue explores how and why the schooling of children with disabilities was restructured and institutionalised, framed and legitimised, within different twentieth-century welfare state systems. More precisely, the special issue contains six articles that, in different ways, strengthen our knowledge about the educational history of children with disabilities in relation to changing welfare regimes during the century. Three of the studies examine the opportunities available to persons with disabilities within the framework of the Nordic welfare state model. Two focus on Switzerland, which can be defined as a post-liberal welfare regime. The final study explores the situation of persons with disabilities in Germany, Romania, and Russia. Together, the articles in this issue aim to deepen our understanding of the historical relationship between disability and education, and to situate these developments within the broader context of welfare state formation and transformation.

In arranging the contributions, we have chosen a geographical structure that also reflects different welfare state models. This organisation underscores how national contexts and welfare regimes shaped the possibilities and limits of education for disabled pupils, while also inviting comparative reflection across diverse settings.

The Nordic articles show how ambitions of equality were continually negotiated in practice, as strong political commitments to inclusion coexisted with persistent processes of classification, professional interpretation, and labour-market regulation. In the article "Tracing the biologistic ability paradigm in Danish special education: A historical inquiry into three Danish welfare state contexts, 1923–2023" Christian Ydesen and Bjørn F. Hamre offers a diachronic and comparative analysis of how biologistic notions of intelligence and ability have shaped Danish special education across three key welfare state contexts: the interwar period, the post-war era, and the contemporary moment. Drawing on Foucault's concept of dispositives – discipline, security, and optimisation – the authors examine how scientific discourses such as psychology, psychiatry, and psychotechnics have been mobilised to classify, differentiate, and govern students within the Danish education system.

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[16] See e.g. Margret A. Winzer, *The History of Special Education: From Isolation to Integration* (Washington: Gallaudet University Press, 1993); Jameel Hampton, *Disability and the Welfare State in Britain: Changes in Perception and Policy 1948–79* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2016). Also see the edited volume by Len Barton and Felicity Armstrong, eds., *Policy, Experience and Change: Cross-Cultural Reflections on Inclusive Education* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007).

The article argues that the biologistic ability paradigm has functioned as a persistent technology of governance, influencing both inclusion and exclusion in education. It shows how the Danish welfare state has historically used education not only to promote equality but also to manage population diversity through biologically grounded classifications. In the contemporary context, the reintroduction of IQ screening for gifted children reflects a shift from universalist ideals toward individual optimisation and competitiveness, aligned with the logic of the "competition state." By tracing these developments, the article contributes to understanding how biologistic reasoning has shaped the evolving relationship between education and welfare governance in Denmark.

Whereas Ydesen and Hamre trace the persistence of biologistic reasoning across a century, Thom Axelsson and Anna Larsson offer a more concentrated study of how Swedish professionals in the 1940s–1970s interpreted pupils' absence from school. In the article "Truancy, school phobia, or school fatigue? Understandings of students' absenteeism, 1945–1975" the authors show that the reasons for school absenteeism have varied over time. By using documents written by, among others, experts in the field of psychology, the article critically analyses how different professional groups interpreted and reacted to truancy, revealing both continuity and change over time in the prevailing concept of psychoculture. According to the authors, the concept refers to a way of thinking that has been shaped by the language and ideas of psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the cause was considered to be problems with obedience or maturity. In the following decades, the same absenteeism was attributed to anxiety problems (1960s) and, in the 1970s, to dissatisfaction. The terms used to describe school absenteeism also changed over time. The term truancy was often used in the 1940s and 1950s to describe school absenteeism, regardless of its underlying cause, and was often presented as a moral issue: a student who was absent without a valid reason was considered to be neglecting their duty and thus behaving inappropriately. In the 1960s, school absenteeism was described using the term "school phobia," while in the 1970s it was seen more as an expression of dissatisfaction. The description of dissatisfaction meant that less emphasis was placed on constitutional factors and opened up the psychocultural framework for interpretations that placed the cause of absenteeism in the school environment rather than in the individual student. During the same period (the 1970s), exemptions from school attendance in favour of internships or extended practical training became a common measure. Their conclusion is that the interpretation of absence has historically been dependent on institutional structures, professional agendas and available intervention methods.

In the following article "Needed and Valuable Instead of Just Being Employed:" Vocational Training, Work and Social Usefulness Regarding People with Intellectual Disability in Sweden, 1945–1989" by Thomas Barow the focus shifts from school to employment opportunities for people with what we today refer to as intellectual disability. Barrow uses the concept of intellectual disability as an umbrella term for a heterogeneous group of people whose commonality lies in the vague assumption that they are unlikely to achieve the learning objectives of regular primary education. Analytically the article is based on the concept of employability and what significance it has had historically for a marginalised group. Barrow particularly highlights the complexity surrounding the discussion of work and employment for people with intellectual disabilities during a period in the welfare state that has otherwise been described as inclusive and progressive. However, for people with intellectual disabilities, the expansion of the welfare state did not have the same significance in terms of opportunities for work and education but instead led to (continued) marginalisation.

Taken together, the Nordic studies illustrate both the ambitions and contradictions of the Nordic model of welfare. The issue next examines Switzerland, where different welfare state logics shaped the historical trajectory of education for disabled pupils.

In the article "From segregation to inclusion: Special needs education and the transformation of the Swiss welfare state" Michèle Hofmann and Lukas Boser explore the historical relationship between special needs education and the development of the Swiss welfare state, tracing the shift from segregated schooling to inclusive education from the late nineteenth century to the present. Hofmann and Boser argue that both segregation and inclusion are deeply embedded in the logic of the welfare state, which seeks to integrate individuals into society while managing public expenditure.

Using a rich historical source base and a knowledge-historical approach, the authors show how medico-statistical classifications and actuarial thinking shaped early welfare policies, leading to the institutionalisation of special education for "abnormal" children. They demonstrate how statistical surveys and pedagogical expertise contributed to the categorisation and separation of children, legitimising state intervention. In the post-war and contemporary periods, inclusive education emerged as a new ideal, yet its implementation remains uneven and contested. The article highlights how meritocratic principles and cost-efficiency continue to influence educational policy, complicating the realisation of inclusive schooling. Ultimately, the authors argue that the transformation from segregation to inclusion reflects not a rupture, but a reconfiguration of welfare state rationalities, where both models serve similar goals of social integration and fiscal sustainability.

While Hofmann and Boser provide a long-term perspective on segregation and inclusion, Michael Geiss turns to the late twentieth century and examines the role of educational technologies in shaping participation. In the article "Special tools: educational technologies for children and adults with disabilities in Switzerland, 1970s to 1990s," Geiss investigates the history of computer-based technologies for children and adults with disabilities in Switzerland. Drawing on historical institutionalism the analysis shows how assistive technologies and educational software initially emerged from bottom-up initiatives led by disability organisations, foundations, educators and dedicated technical experts at the regional level. Early efforts concentrated on hardware for people with physical disabilities, offering new educational opportunities. The development of software for people with intellectual disabilities proved far more challenging. Rather than being guided by utopian visions, these initiatives were pragmatic in orientation and aimed at directly fostering participation. To sustain progress collaboration was eventually sought with national stakeholders and the issue of specialised hardware and software for people with disabilities became a national policy issue in the final decades of the twentieth century. Yet the overall impact remained limited, revealing constraints of educational policy in a post-liberal welfare state.

Finally, the issue expands its scope eastward to explore the legacy of Vygotsky's Defectology, situating debates on disability and education within the context of state socialism and its transnational reverberations. The article "In the Shadows of the Iron Curtain: The Forgotten Legacy of Vygotsky's Defectology," by Radu Dinu and Laura Elena Runceanu, delves into Vygotsky's contributions to disability studies and special education, gathered under the term "defectology." Drawing on a literature review and interviews with scholars in Germany, Romania, and Russia it reconstructs the conceptual history of "defectology" and traces its varied reception across different political and cultural settings. In state-socialist countries, Vygotsky's inclusive and humanitarian approach was often overshadowed by segregationist traditions in special education, though his ideas experienced a revival in the Soviet Union during the late 1980s. In Romania, defectology remained marginal compared to his other theories, while in West Germany it was taken up in a politicised climate where it informed challenges to segregationist practices but also encountered institutional resistance. The authors conclude that, despite its negative connotations, Vygotsky's Defectology remains a dynamic framework that continues to shape contemporary debates on disability, special education and inclusion.

Collectively, the contributions to this special issue illuminate several shared tendencies in how European welfare states have historically approached the education of children classified as disabled. The shift from segregated to integrated schooling, for example, did not occur uniformly across Europe, and often involved complex negotiations between parents, disability organisations, professionals, and policymakers. Across diverse national contexts, education has functioned not only as a site of inclusion but also as a mechanism for classification, differentiation, and governance. Whether through biologistic paradigms in Denmark or medico-statistical reasoning in Switzerland, the welfare state has consistently mobilised expert knowledge to define and manage educational differences.

Another recurring theme is the tension between egalitarian ideals and the enduring influence of meritocratic and cost-efficiency logics. As several articles demonstrate, integrated education has frequently been framed as a democratic imperative, yet its implementation remains uneven and contested – shaped by fiscal constraints, diagnostic cultures, and institutional inertia. Across the cases, we see both continuity and change: persistent reliance on expert knowledge and categorisation, but also evolving interpretations of disability, education, and participation. The transition from segregation to inclusion, as Hofmann and Boser argue, does not represent a rupture but rather a reconfiguration of welfare state rationalities, wherein both models pursue similar objectives of social integration and economic sustainability. Moreover, the articles underscore how disability and education have been entangled with broader societal projects – from nation-building and labour market participation to technological innovation and civil rights. Whether examining vocational training, assistive technologies, or the legacy of Vygotsky's Defectology, the contributions highlight the need to historicise educational transformations within the shifting political, cultural, and epistemic landscapes of the welfare state. Lastly, integration, inclusion, and normalisation, as ideas and policy concepts, has clearly played a role in most of these cases, but so has economic possibilities and professional conflicts.

By foregrounding these shared dynamics, this special issue contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to bridge the fields of disability history and educational history. It invites further reflection on how welfare states – be they liberal, post-liberal, neoliberal, conservative or social democratic – have shaped and continue to shape the educational trajectories of disabled children, not only through policies and institutions, but through the very categories and expectations that define what it means to learn, to belong, and to be included. Our belief is that the articles underlines that the historical relationship between disability and education continues to challenge conventional periodisation and concepts within both educational history and welfare state research.

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