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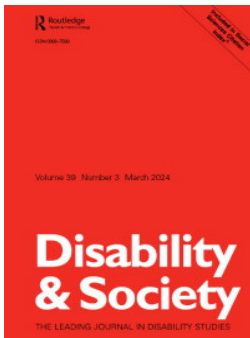
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Is something rotten in the state of Denmark? Austerity measures from a child and youth perspective

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ABSTRACT

Inspired by Disabled Children's Childhood Studies and the lived citizenship approach, this article examines austerity in Denmark from the perspectives of 39 disabled children and young people. The article investigates austerity as a phenomenon encompassing symbolic, material, and affective dimensions. It sheds light on financial cutbacks and their consequences, and points to a more general development in political ideas of welfare. Following the financial crisis, policies aimed at economic growth and productivity, coupled with austerity measures, have created a domino effect. The combination of cutbacks and the political portrayal of disabled people as a "cost problem" legitimises the deterioration of the group's living conditions and access to public services and assistance. Due to austerity measures, disabled children and young people have increasingly come to experience their relationships with local governments as exhausting and stressful for themselves and their parents, which causes them to develop feelings of guilt and shame.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Austerity; disability; lived citizenship; childhood; youth

Points of Interest

- This article examines economic cutbacks in Denmark and their effects on everyday life from the perspectives of 39 disabled children and young people.
- The cutbacks are evident in the way disabled people are portrayed as a "cost problem" for society by Danish politicians.
- The cutbacks are also evident as there has been limited progress in the group's living conditions and reductions in their access to public services and assistance.

- Disabled children and young people experience their limited access to public services and assistance as exhausting and stressful for themselves and their parents.
- Disabled children and young people see themselves as a burden to their families and develop feelings of guilt and shame.

Introduction

Denmark is often seen as one of the most generous universal welfare states in Scandinavia (Esping-Andersen 1990). However, since the financial crisis, the disability area in Denmark has been affected by austerity measures for a period of almost 10 years. In Denmark, controlling and reducing the expenses of cost-intensive groups in the fields of psychiatry and disability has been based on policies and practices on the one hand and new categories of disability on the other. Disabled children and young people are portrayed as a group who can and ought to become independent of public services through an abundance of positivity and an eagerness for normalisation and inclusion, for example in primary school settings (Ringø et al. 2017). In this article, we will analyse the symbolic, material, and affective dimensions of political cost-effectiveness policy implemented as austerity measures in Denmark and how these measures affect everyday life and lived citizenship from the perspectives of 39 disabled children and young people.

Despite the economic and material dimensions of the multiple reforms in the public sector over the past 10 to 15 years, there are hardly any studies of how (the intersectional dimensions of) austerity measures have changed the disability area, specifically in Denmark, and particularly few on how disabled children and young people experience and live with austerity, for example in terms of how it affects their psycho-emotional wellbeing and access to public services and assistance (Thomas 1999). However, following the financial crisis, several studies have been published on austerity and its effects on the lives of disabled people in Western societies. These effects have been examined e.g. in terms of increased poverty (Cross 2013; Flynn 2019; Goodley 2014; Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick-Cole 2014; Ryan 2019), limited access to public services and assistance (Flynn 2019; Malli et al. 2018; Wiseman 2014), social isolation (Malli et al. 2018), hate rhetoric/speech (Briant, Watson, and Philo 2013; Burch 2018; Garthwaite 2014, 2015), hate crimes (Healy 2020), as well as various forms of discriminating bureaucratic practices (Norberg 2022). The studies are all relevant, but they are often empirically limited to the UK (see Macdonald and Morgan (2021) for a literature review about the impact of austerity on disabled people, the elderly, and immigrants in the UK). However, there has recently been an increase in studies of austerity measures in Scandinavia – especially in Sweden. For example, according to Altermark (2017) and Altermark

and Nilsson (2020), disabled people in Sweden have been accused of welfare crimes in relation to personal assistance, and Norberg (2019) finds that disabled people are positioned as “too costly for society” in times of austerity.

The above studies are relevant to understand how austerity affects the lives of disabled people. However, they are rarely empirically based on the perspectives of children and young people (Flynn 2017, 2019), although there are a few examples. A small section of Wiseman’s PhD thesis (2014) concerns the impact of austerity on disabled young people. Wiseman shows how austerity has an affective dimension as the feelings of disabled young people about themselves are “(...) *inextricably linked to the policies that directed the support that they received*” (Wiseman 2014, 245), thus closely connecting austerity to the selfhood, self-esteem, and psycho-emotional wellbeing of disabled young people (Thomas 1999; Wiseman 2014).

Comparative welfare studies often claim that Denmark has not been seriously impacted by austerity; it is a state with *restricted austerity*, so to speak (Blyth 2013; Greve 2019; Mailand 2014). This may be correct because of the overall absence of cutbacks in the public economy. In this sense, Denmark is an untraditional case – especially in contrast to liberal and conservative welfare regimes in Western societies (Esping-Andersen 1990), e.g. the UK. In the wake of the financial crisis, the main political focus in Denmark has been getting citizens into work through labour market reforms aiming at increasing the labour supply. Successive Danish governments have implemented welfare reforms and prioritised sectors and groups in society that are expected to improve the state’s competitiveness and the economy. In this sense, the Danish state has acted as an investment- and competitive state (Cerny 2010; Jessop 2002). The result has been a lack of political and economic attention to groups in society that depend on public services and assistance. This has become clear through a delimited focus on the disability area in Denmark. Progress in living conditions for disabled people has stagnated since the financial crisis. Based on surveys in 2012, 2016, and 2020 with more than 18,000 participants in each survey, Amilon, Østergaard, and Olsen (2021) concluded that, overall, there have been close to no improvements in disabled people’s living conditions in Denmark for over 10 years. A recently published evaluation of the reform of social inclusion in primary and secondary schools in Denmark for the period from 2015 to 2021 demonstrates a steep increase in children and young people in need of support and, most conspicuously, shows that many (7.2%) of these children and young people are not getting the support they need (VIVE 2022). Similar surveys show the same trends for the same group, with a growing number of young people with psychiatric or physical diagnoses who do not start or complete educational programmes, compared to their peers (Phil and Jensen 2021; Phil and Salmon 2021).

In this article, we examine how the disability area in Denmark has been affected by austerity measures after the financial crisis from the perspectives

of 39 disabled children and young people. With inspiration from Hitchen (2016, 2021) and Hall (2019), who conceptualise austerity as more than an economic and fiscal policy, namely as a phenomenon which can also be understood through “(...) *individuals’ lived and felt realities* (...)” (Hitchen 2016, 102), the analysis will progress on three analytical levels: 1) the symbolic dimension, 2) the material dimension and 3) the affective dimension of austerity, with a primary focus on how austerity affects the lived citizenship and everyday lives of disabled children and young people. We have chosen these three dimensions by drawing on our theoretical inspiration from Hitchen and Hall’s conceptualisation of austerity and by considering the barriers and challenges articulated by the children and young people themselves.

For the symbolic dimension, we explore the austerity measures from 2009 to 2018 in Denmark based on the financial agreements adopted during the period by successive governments and Local Government Denmark (KL) (the interest organisation of the 98 Danish municipalities). Thereafter, we analyse a political rhetoric which arose in connection with the political and economic negotiations, through which disabled people were positioned as “cuckoos in the nest”. Although austerity measures can be understood as a political response to a particular economic problem (Blyth 2013), they also become “*ideologically reworked’ into the political problem of ‘how to allocate blame and responsibility’*” (Bramall 2013, 2; Norberg 2019, 66). Based on Bramall (2013), we do not understand austerity measures as politically neutral or a “necessary evil” but as something which is more or less (intentionally) shaped by moral and ideological understandings of how the future should look and how such a future should be realised. The aim of this section is to investigate the symbolic structures that impact disabled people across Denmark. However, it is first in the two sections hereafter, that we will illustrate the specific impact of these symbolic structures on disabled children and young people.

Regarding the material dimension, we use official descriptive statistics to analyse how public expenditure evolved in the disability area from 2009 to 2018 and how the access of disabled children and young people to public services and assistance was affected in terms of their eligibility to receive a wheelchair-accessible van and citizen-led personal assistance when they turned eighteen. The focus of the analysis is to investigate how austerity measures affect the material living conditions of disabled children and young people and their lived citizenship (Lister 2007) in terms of participation in everyday life activities, as well as their possibilities to create and maintain relationships with friends, peers, and family members.

The analysis of the affective dimension concerns how austerity affects the psycho-emotional wellbeing of disabled children and young people (Thomas 1999). The overall focus of the analysis is the lived experience of austerity from the perspectives of 39 disabled children and young people, as the lived experience is frequently absent from research, and there is still

only limited knowledge about how disabled children and young people experience, live, and feel in times of austerity (Flynn 2019; Wiseman 2014).

Disabled Children's Childhood Studies and the lived citizenship approach

The analysis is theoretically inspired by *Disabled Children's Childhood Studies* – an approach formulated and conceptualized by Curran and Runswick-Cole (2013, 2014). Firstly, the approach aims to shift the focus of research so that research is not only conducted “about” disabled children and young people, for example, research in which they are objects of medical and developmental psychological perceptions of what is “normal” or “age-appropriate”, and in which their bodies are perceived as a “deviation” or a “problem”. The approach encourages ethical and methodological research that emphasises children’s and young people’s own voices, perspectives, and lived experiences as the centre of the research.

Secondly, the approach seeks to problematise various forms of structural hegemony and unequal distributions of power and privileges, for example, in relation to disablism/ableism. It rejects the idea that disabled children and young people must live up to medical and developmental psychological notions, expectations, and myths about the “normal” child and life. Instead, the approach insists on recognising the differences and diversity of the group and thereby explores how disabled children and young people in local and global contexts experience and understand conditions such as inequality and injustice and how their perspectives and experiences are related to and shaped by different structural, institutional, national, and/or global conditions, contexts, and changes (Curran and Runswick-Cole 2014, 1619 ff.). In other words, the approach actively breaks with the obscurity in which disabled children and young people have lived in research historically. However, one potential objection to this approach may arise from the concern that it could lead to the categorisation of disabled children and young people as a restricted generational segment, possibly positioning the group as “special” or “different” from other individuals.

The theoretical inspiration from *Disabled Children's Childhood Studies* is combined with Lister’s conceptualisation of lived citizenship (2007). To Lister, citizenship is practised contextually in everyday life and affects citizens’ positioning, identity, and sense of belonging. As Warming and Fahnøe (2017) emphasise, the lived citizenship approach (Lister 2007) moves beyond liberal (Rawls 1971), social liberal (Marshall 1950), and communitarian (Taylor 1994) citizenship traditions, as citizenship is extended to concern practices in everyday life. As Kallio, Wood, and Häkli (2020, 713) highlight, it is a “(...) *generative approach to recognise the embodied, relational and lived experiences of being a citizen in everyday life*”. Following Delanty (2000, 46), the lived citizenship approach is an example of “*radical theories of politics*” that seek to confront unequal power relations in society through which discrimination, exclusion, and stigmatisation are (re)produced. Thus, disabled children’s and

young people's lived, embodied, and relational experiences with inclusion/exclusion and equal/unequal opportunities in relation to participation are a crucial theoretical perspective in the investigation of austerity on their citizenship (Warming 2011, 2013; Warming and Fahnøe 2017, 4; Wiseman 2014). For example, in Denmark, disabled children and young people are guaranteed a wide range of formal rights. However, their opportunities to benefit from these rights are often negotiated in local municipalities. As professional efforts are embedded in power relations, problem definitions and categorisations are not necessarily coherent with what families experience as their conditions and needs (Villadsen and Mik-Meyer 2012). In a welfare state context, research indicates that despite the strong political emphasis on inclusion, the perspectives of families with disabled children and young people are often neglected during encounters with local municipalities and frontline professionals when attempting to discuss their child's wellbeing. Families often feel overlooked as experts regarding their children, especially if their thoughts, and possibly complaints, do not align with the view presented by the professionals (Cavet 2000; Dowling and Dolan 2001).

Research process

The empirical data was produced through ethnographic fieldwork to explore how different barriers limit disabled children and young people in their everyday life seen from a child and youth perspective. The ethnographic fieldwork was conducted by following 39 disabled children and young people through a large part of their everyday life, for example, in their homes, in day-care, in school, and in connection with various leisure activities. A total of 178h of fieldwork visits were conducted, with each visit taking between one and eight hours. The average length of the visits was 4.5h. The duration was limited for various reasons. Not all children and young people had the time and opportunity to participate for a whole day. Several were unable to take part in longer visits due to impairment effects such as pain, fatigue, and sensory overload (Thomas 1999).

The data was produced through a broad involvement of disabled children and young people. This means that children and young people aged from approximately two to 22 years were included to reflect the variation in the group. The average age was 14. Only four individuals are of legal age. They describe and identify themselves as "young people" and attend an educational program designed for individuals under 18 years old. Instead of excluding them solely based on age, we choose to include them. We consider this choice to be in line with the Disabled Children's Childhood Approach, and we refer to these young individuals as "young adults" when necessary.

All the participants had at least one physical impairment, but their impairments varied in terms of physical, mental, and cognitive impairments. The

reason for this strategy is that the study does not concern the specific impairment of the child or young person. Instead, the study's focus is on the barriers which occur in their everyday lives from their own perspectives and which they share with each other. The recruitment was conducted with the assistance of several disability organisations, who highlighted the research project in their monthly newsletters. Additionally, Facebook and other social media platforms were also utilised, often resulting in children, young people, and their parents contacting us directly. Subsequently, we were able to establish an official agreement, obtain consent, and schedule dates, times, and specific considerations, such as the duration of individual participation.

For the analysis of the symbolic dimension of austerity, we selected those financial agreements adopted between 2009-2018 by successive governments and Local Government Denmark. The reason for this is that the Danish state ratified *The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* in 2009 and that 2009 marked a shift in the economic policy which was highly influenced by the financial crisis. All financial agreements have been reviewed and categorised to identify how the actors addressed, described, and agreed upon matters related to the disability area during the period. In relation to the section concerning the political rhetoric and the positioning of disabled people as "cuckoos in the nest", we have selected those political statements that have been most prominent in the public and in the press and which several of the young people mentioned themselves.

However, although (ethnographic) data was produced about many different types of barriers, both in terms of doing and being (Thomas 1999), this article and the following analysis will focus on how disabled children and young people experience their relationship with their municipality and their access to public services and assistance. Unprompted, many children and young people described their municipality as an immense barrier, for example, because it is stressful, time-consuming, and difficult to receive the public services and assistance they require to enable their inclusion and participation in everyday life activities. However, before we undertake that analysis, we will examine the symbolic dimension of austerity in the disability area in Denmark from 2009 to 2018.

Results

The symbolic dimension: disabled people as a "cost problem"

In the years after the local government reform in Denmark in 2007 and the financial crisis in 2008, public spending on the disability area in Denmark increased due to increases in the segment of the population requiring welfare services and support. Among other things, this was caused by an increase in the number of young people suffering from mental illnesses and a

demographic shift towards a larger number of elderly citizens. In the period from 2009–2018, successive governments called a halt to the rising expenditures on specialised social services. These demands were expressed in the declarations of intent in the annual financial agreements between successive governments and Local Government Denmark (KL):

The recent year's significant expenditure growth within the specialised social area must stop. This presupposes that within the framework of the legislation, the municipalities undertake this responsibility. (Ministry of Finance 2009, Own translation)

In the coming years, the municipalities will have to make the necessary local priorities and adjustments to live up to the overall financial framework for the municipal economy. This will require curbing the massive expenditure growth within specialised areas. (Ministry of Finance 2010, Own translation)

In the wake of the financial crisis, the specialised social area, and thus disabled people, was positioned as a “cost problem” for society and successive governments. However, the declarations of intent regarding the reduction in public expenditure must also be seen in relation to the interplay between the international and national economies. For example, the European Fiscal Compact has an impact on the management of public expenditure, including how priorities in the budget of the overall service have shifted between the social areas in Denmark. Under the Compact, states committed to keeping their budget deficits below 0.5% of GDP. As a result, the Danish government adopted the so-called “Budget Act”, aiming to “ensure a balance or surplus on total public finances and appropriate expenditure management in the state, municipalities, and regions” (Retsinformation 2012, Own translation). The legislation entails setting an annual expenditure cap on municipal expenditures on services, and financial sanctions have been introduced to sanction the municipalities if they exceed their budgets.

The political positioning of disabled people as “cuckoos in the nest”

At the same time as the above declarations of intent, politicians rhetorically positioned the specialised social area and disabled people as “cuckoos in the nest” in the press and in the annual financial negotiations between Local Government Denmark (KL) and successive governments. In nature, a cuckoo in the nest is a young bird that, after hatching, lives the first period of its life in another bird’s nest. However, if one looks up the term in a Danish dictionary, the concept is defined as a “person, institution or a phenomenon that parasitizes on or dominates its surroundings” (The Danish Dictionary 24.06.2021, Own translation). In 2009, the former chairman of Local Government Denmark (KL) stated the following after the annual financial negotiations:

“In the long run, it is not possible for us to sustain additional growth in the specialised areas that must be financed from the normal areas. It’s a cuckoo in the nest that needs to get out of the system”.

A similar, but not entirely identical, statement was made by the current chairman of Local Government Denmark (KL) in 2016:

“It [the disability area] puts a lot of pressure on us, especially when the government also requires us to save. Everyone is talking about us having to make it [the disability area] cheaper and cheaper. So, having areas with budget overruns puts pressure on all other areas”.

Subsequently, there have been several more examples of politicians using the “cuckoos in the nest” rhetoric, the latest example being from 2019 when a mayor said: *“Like a cuckoo in the nest, the specialised social area has eaten from other welfare sectors that are supposed to benefit citizens”*. In summation, the specialised social area and disabled people have not only been rhetorically positioned as “too costly” for the municipalities and society; they have also been positioned as a group who undermine public welfare and the economy like “cuckoos in the nest”. This rhetoric is comparable to that in Sweden (Norberg 2019) and the UK (Briant et.al. 2013; Ryan 2019), and it is an example of how, during times of austerity, politicians rhetorically allocate guilt, shame, and responsibility to groups who depend on public services and assistance (Bramall 2013; Lemke 2001; Tyler 2013, 211).

The material dimension: public cutbacks and limited access to services and assistance

In 2019, Local Government Denmark (KL) published a fact sheet in which the organisation calculated the impact of expenditure savings on average service costs per inhabitant. The conclusion was that from 2009 to 2017, there was a decrease of approximately DKK 4,000 per inhabitant (EUR 578 per inhabitant) (Mailand 2014). Houlberg and Ruge (2020), who conducted a similar study, came to the same conclusion. In a publication from Local Government Denmark (KL), the Ministry of Children and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, and the Ministry of Finance (2017), the development in expenditures in the specialised social area was more specifically described. The conclusion was that there had been a decrease in total net operating expenses of DKK 4.2 billion from 2009 to 2016 (appr. EUR 565 million). Some of the cutbacks can be explained by changes in social policy that became more preventive during the period, resulting in fewer children and young people being placed in care outside their homes. Still, this change does not explain the entire reduction. The largest decrease was from 2010 to 2011 (DKK 2.6 billion). After this, the level of expenditure was relatively stable. However, this is not entirely positive, as the number of people in need of services and assistance increased during the same period. For example, the Ministry of Social Affairs found that the proportion of people in need of public services and assistance in the specialised social areas increased by 16,500

individuals from 2014 to 2017. Furthermore, the Benchmarking Unit for the Ministry of Social Affairs found that:

The number of children and young people with registered diagnoses increased from 32 to 49 per 1,000 0–17-year-olds in the period 2009 to 2019, an increase of more than 50 per cent. (2019, 5, Own translation)

In summation, on the structural macro-level, the proportion of people in need of public service and assistance has increased, while the total net operating expenses in the municipalities have decreased. This means that the municipalities are tasked with providing more public services and assistance but within a smaller budget. This situation has material consequences for disabled children and young people. In the following, the possibility of receiving a wheelchair-accessible van and citizen-led personal assistance is used as an exemplary case.

Access to wheelchair-accessible vans and citizen-led personal assistance – an exemplary case

During the period of austerity, the time taken to process a case concerning support for a wheelchair-accessible van increased while the number of approved vans decreased. Based on official statistics, the number of approved cases decreased by 314 from 2011 to 2019 (Danmarks Statistik 2021). At the same time, the average processing time for a case increased by seven weeks from 33 wk in 2011 to 40 wk in 2019, and in some municipalities, the average processing time for a case was almost two years (Danmarks Statistik 2021). The processing time for a wheelchair-accessible van can have consequences for children and young people who need more flexibility in their everyday lives. A processing time of half a year or even a full year is therefore experienced as very long.

Another empirical example of how austerity affects disabled young people's lives in Denmark is the decrease in the number of people receiving citizen-led personal assistance. From 2016 to 2019, the influx of recipients decreased by 46%, from 130 in 2016 to 70 in 2019 (Ministry of Social Affairs and the Elderly 2021). For some disabled young people/young adults, this development has made it increasingly difficult to receive citizen-led personal assistance. Several disabled young people and young adults report that in the wake of their request for citizen-led personal assistance, their municipality has opened a case to put them under guardianship – even though no professional assessments spoke in favour of this. Young adults under guardianship do not qualify for citizen-led personal assistance.

The side effects of the material consequences of austerity are comprehensive, as inclusion and participation in everyday activities for children and young people have been limited over the same period. Oliver (14 years) says

the following regarding his experience of a long case processing time concerning his application for a wheelchair-accessible van:

I'm also just a human being, and I also want to take my friends home from school (...). Have more freedom and such (...). The first time we applied for the van, the municipality didn't involve us at all, so we complained. And it took a very long time. I completely forgot that we'd applied for the van. But eventually, we got it. It was like I got my life back.

In the example, the case processing time was almost a year, which is why Oliver eventually forgot that the application had been sent to his municipality. The quote also makes it clear that a van can be an important instrument for being spontaneous and maintaining friendships. A van can have a liberating effect and create an opportunity for inclusion, participation, and a sense of belonging. Lindsay (2016) reached a similar result in a systematic literature review concerning, among other things, how children and young people with cerebral palsy experience transport. Lindsay found that the potential for spontaneity can give children and young people a feeling of freedom, as they feel less limited. A wheelchair-accessible van eliminates or at least reduces some of the material and relational barriers (Thomas 1999) that occur in everyday life and thereby enables more spontaneity and flexibility as well as more opportunities to socialise.

In relation to the lower number of people receiving citizen-led personal assistance, one young adult, Anna (22), has waited almost four years to get citizen-led personal assistance, and she describes the consequences for her everyday life in this way:

I feel that I'm not treated as a person but as a thing. An unimportant thing. I get stressed and depressed when I think about not knowing what's going to happen to me. And I get sad because I feel like a burden to my mother, who is forced to help me alongside her job.

Both regarding applications for a wheelchair-accessible van and citizen-led personal assistance, the case processing time is a factor that limits children and young people in their everyday lives. It has an impact on which spaces they are included in or excluded from and which relations they can form and maintain, and it also has an impact on their psycho-emotional well-being (Thomas 1999). Anna is one example of several disabled young people/adults for whom the case processing time makes them stressed and depressed and leads to a kind of paranoia towards their municipality (Hitchen 2021). This paranoia is expressed as a fear that the public services and assistance they are already receiving may be reduced or withdrawn and as guilt and shame about "burdening their parents" in cases where they do not receive public services and assistance or must wait several months or even years for it.

The affective dimension: the allocation of blame, shame, and responsibility

Austerity is often applied by governments as an instrument against economic challenges, e.g. lack of growth. However, it also seems to be an expression of dissemination of (neoliberal) ideology and moral discourses and rules through which guilt, shame, and personal responsibility are allocated (Bramall 2013; Lemke 2001; Norberg 2019). Several disabled children and young people report that their parents' relationship and contact with their municipality is often so stressful and exhausting for them that they develop feelings of guilt and shame. The same was the case with Anna, who described herself as a burden to her mother. Frederik (11), Ida (15) and Johan (14) put it this way:

My mother often gets sad when she has spoken with the municipality. It's okay to be sad, but she shouldn't be all the time, and when she is, of course I start to feel like it's my fault.

I can tell from my mother that she finds it really hard sometimes. And I feel sort of guilty because I'm the one who has a disability, and if I didn't, many things would be much easier.

I don't want to feel like I'm a burden on my mum and dad, and I'm aware that they don't think I am, but that doesn't matter if I can sense it on them. That's why I stopped myself from asking to do things I really wanted to do. Going to sports or doing something more in my everyday life. After school and such. With my friends. But I don't think my parents can take any more. They have enough work with the municipality. With my case and such. In that way, I stop myself, if you understand.

As the examples show, guilt and shame are allocated and distributed through relationships with the municipalities. The affective dimensions of austerity, therefore, seem to be something that disabled children and young people are forced to feel and live with (Hitchen 2016, 2021), as they perceive the challenges that their parents have with the municipalities as an outcome of their own bodies and impairments. It is well documented in the research literature how clients' social identity and subject positions are affected by and highly interwoven with the institutional settings and the problem definitions and constructions they are met with (Cavet 2000; Dowling and Dolan 2001). The extensive empirical foundation of this article adds to this point of how structural challenges are individualised as a personal problem and responsibility, and how this causes children and young people to undermine their own psycho-emotional wellbeing (Reeve 2002; Thomas 1999). As they explain, the treatment they and their parents are subjected to is because of their own bodies. Thus, the children and young people describe themselves as a burden to their families and society. Following Delanty (2003), who conceptualises citizenship as a cultural learning process and thereby emphasises the subjective, emotional, and affective dimensions of how the citizenship

learning process is executed as either disciplinary/exclusive or inclusive/solidarity, the above quotes are examples of how disabled children and young people are objects to disciplinary citizenship learning processes. As Warming and Fahnøe (2017, 7) point out: “(...) *disciplinary citizenship is shaped by symbolic power relations that produce a double exclusion based on discrimination and self-exclusion*”. The examples illustrate how children and young people are subject to this double exclusion of discrimination and self-exclusion. *Discrimination* expresses itself through austerity and several structural changes in the disability area, for example, the combination of cutbacks, negative rhetoric, and the positioning of disabled people as a burden, the limited access to public services and assistance, and the experience of a more stressful and exhausting family life. *Self-exclusion* seems to be a result of how discrimination changes and challenges disabled children and young people affectively, for example in terms of internalised oppression/ableism (Reeve 2002). This causes them to describe themselves as a burden to their own families and society and conduct self-exclusion and isolation to protect their parents and families.

Discussion: to be or not to be a generous welfare state?

Austerity cannot be reduced to something purely economic. It is a multifaceted phenomenon with symbolic, material, and affective dimensions, and it affects the lives of disabled children and young people in various ways.

Firstly, after the financial crisis, the disability area and disabled people in Denmark have rhetorically been positioned as a “cost problem” for society and pointed out as a group who undermine the public welfare and economy. These findings are comparable to those of Briant, Watson, and Philo (2013), Burch (2018), Ryan (2019), and Norberg (2019). Following Tyler and Slater (2018), the financial crisis has apparently created a *capitalist shock* and a political climate in which:

public anxieties and hostilities are channelled towards those groups within the population, such as the unemployed, homeless people, welfare recipients, irregular migrants, disabled people, ill and elderly populations, who are imagined to be a parasitical drain upon scarce resources. (Tyler 2013, 211)

These different kinds of political rhetoric are examples of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) and neoliberal stigma (Tyler and Slater 2018), and they seem to legitimise public cutbacks and the undermining of disabled people’s living conditions.

Secondly, the symbolic dimension of austerity does not just figure at the political level, as it has real material consequences for the lived citizenship of disabled children and young people. As shown in the analysis, disabled children

and young people experience increasing difficulty in getting access to public services and assistance that enable accessibility, social inclusion, and participation. The case processing time in multiple cases is often so long that it creates material and relational barriers in everyday life, for example, in relation to maintaining social relations such as friendships. These findings are similar to those of Cross (2013), Goodley (2014), Ryan (2019) and Macdonald and Morgan (2021).

Thirdly, the symbolic and material dimensions interconnect with the affective dimension of austerity. Several disabled children and young people express how the relationship with their municipality is often so stressful and exhausting for their parents that they see themselves as a burden to their own families. As a result, they carry out internalised oppression and different strategies such as self-exclusion and isolation. Furthermore, disabled children and young people are also subject to various forms of psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas 1999) when they or their parents engage with the bureaucracy of municipalities, as they articulate the experience of being objectified and not treated as human beings. These findings are comparable to those of Norberg (2022), who sees similar practices as examples of bureaucratic violence.

While the article reveals a sometimes extremely explicit rhetorical shift and observable financial cutbacks, austerity also puts into question a more general, and sometimes less visible, development in policy and political ideas of welfare that affects the overall view of disabled people in Denmark. This development reflects a strong individualised focus and responsibility for change and improvement for disabled people and their families through an abundance of individual training programmes, cognitive skills training, and expectations of normalisation and inclusion (Ringø et al. 2017; Ringø and Howe 2022). The forms of knowledge that investigate the symbolic, material, and affective consequences of lack of support and accessible institutional settings or material deprivation have, to a great extent, been omitted from the political discourse and rhetoric (Ringø and Howe 2022). As outlined in the theoretical and empirical reflections above, there is a basic notion that in order to meet the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the Leave No One Behind Agenda (LNOB), political ideas of welfare should convey an understanding of how disability can develop into genuine social problems because of long-term pressures in families with a disabled child. Reductionistic ontological models have at least two consequences. The first is a dismantling of the fundamental debate about what kinds of knowledge, values, and views of human diversity and variation should inform the development of welfare. The second is that austerity, as this article demonstrates, is not only a material cutback in the welfare state. The material dimension is only the tip of the iceberg, as austerity is entangled with symbolic, affective, and moral dimensions and changes in the views of disabled children, young people, and their families, which can be much more subtle and less visible, and therefore much more devastating.

We insist that it should be possible for contemporary advanced welfare states to make multi-disciplinary forms of knowledge about human (disabled) lives visible and thus promote ontological models that involve knowledge of how generative mechanisms, in this case, austerity measures, can produce disabling exclusion or the opposite; how sufficient care, support, and assistance at the right time might enable more resources, accessibility, and inclusion. Overall, the analysis shows how austerity affects everyday life and lived citizenship in different ways and that the dimensions of austerity cannot be seen as clearly separated, but rather that they are connected to each other as a domino effect (Macdonald and Morgan 2021).

Overall, there seems to be a discrepancy between international conventions and development agendas and the past 10 to 15 years of changes in the disability area. Despite that, the Danish state has committed to comply with the SDGs and the LNOB principle. This general and fundamental principle of the international development agenda obliges states to ensure that no group is left behind in the further development of society. However, a recently published Danish study concludes that, due to the lack of statistical data about disabled people in Denmark, it is not practically possible to monitor the development of this group's living conditions towards 2030 (Olsen and Poulsen 2023). Thus, disabled people risk disappearing from the public and political consciousness as a group whose lives depend on some sort of wealth redistribution and welfare. However, as the analysis shows, disabled people have already been left behind in several ways in Denmark, and it seems legitimate to seek new, more visionary solutions.

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