

SPECIAL NEEDS EDUCATION PERSPECTIVES IN THE PRACTICE OF LEISURE-TIME CENTRES

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Abstract

This study carried out at Linnaeus University in the spring of 2012 where students in a special needs education module problematised the teacher's mission with the focus on being able to face differences among children in a pedagogical activity. The aim of the study was to make visible how the teaching and learning of values and attitudes can be promoted in educational practice, as well as to examine student views on including values for leisure-time centre work as stated in the target documents. In the study the students were required to observe activities primarily from the perspective of special needs education concepts referred to as categorical and relational. The results of the observations point to a number of concrete professional pedagogical actions that can be linked to a relational special pedagogy approach.

Key words: *leisure-time centres, leisure-time pedagogues, normative method, special needs.*

Introduction

In the last four decades the notion that school-age educare should be available to all children has prevailed. Children who need special support for their development should have priority to a place. No child can be refused a place in a leisure-time centre because it is considered too gravely handicapped or with reference to lack of expertise or resources. Today leisure-time centres form part of a joint education system involving activities, which are regarded as essential in contributing to lifelong learning. The emphasis on learning has been accentuated in these centres, which are expected to take support in the general advice provided by the school curriculum and to cooperate with preschool class and school (Skolverket, 2007; Karlsudd, 2011a).

The idea behind giving disabled children a place in school-age childcare is that the positive environment offered by the centre should stimulate them. For many children the most important element is the overall quality of such a centre. To others special support may be necessary, e.g. by supplying extra staff for an individual child or child group or support in the form of consultation by a special needs pedagogue and by supervision for the staff. To include every child in the activities of leisure-time centres is a clear ideological goal.

The goals of the leisure-time centre consider the children's all-round abilities to be able to offer other alternatives for learning. As the activities of these centres are not controlled by the relatively detailed aims applying to schools, their efforts to create inclusive activities are facilitated. Narrow definitions of normality and high demands on cognitive skills have, on the other hand, led to negative consequences which have resulted in more and more pupils being taken out of their community to be put into special segregated activities, in particular within the school organization (Karlsudd, 2011b). It is unfortunate if special needs education is thus made to formulate and develop its own pedagogy, as it will lead to increasing the dividing-line. The starting point must be a general pedagogy with common fundamental values applicable to all children and young people. A fusion of these directions is likely to benefit activities aiming at equal treatment.

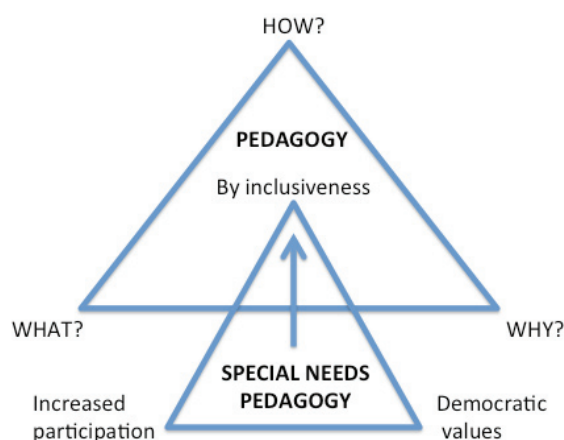


Figure 1: "Desirable fusion". A fusion of general and special needs pedagogy sharing the same prevalent fundamental values.

Research Focus

International and national research have identified two polarized special needs pedagogical perspectives on school difficulties, the categorical and the relational. The categorical perspective, which views difficulties as being more tied to the individual, applies explanation models that can be linked to medical research and psychological test theory. The relational perspective rather associates difficulties with the inability of teaching to reach all pupils. This perspective primarily applies explanation models from sociology and relation theory (Dyson & Millward, 2000; Nilholm, 2006, Persson, 2001; Skidmore, 2004; Skrtic, 1995; Thomas & Loxley, 2001).

Helldin (1997) argues that special needs education must be more inclusive and focus more on social and relational activities instead of overwhelmingly working exclusively. Similar aspects are highlighted by Westling Allodi (2002) with regard to the increase of differentiated groups in school. Segregated groups seem mainly to function as support and protection for pupils who are felt to be divergent or to protect other pupils from divergences. Nordin Hultman (2004) in her dissertation argues that school pedagogy may lie behind some of the problems that it tries to obviate. Therefore the staff should quit scrutinizing qualities, development levels and previous experiences that could easily lead to error-screening strategies and instead raise their eyes to look at children's and young people's abilities as varying from one pedagogical environment to another.

The problems above can be linked to concepts portraying pedagogical environments as either narrow or wide activities (Karlsudd, 2002). The principle of narrow school activities is to focus on performance and ability. The outcome of this may be that the teaching concentrates on deviations and difficulties. Wide activities, on the other hand, rest on a conscious attitude in professional ethics to embrace all pupils' equal value regardless of ability and performance. Giving precedence to ethics and solidarity facilitates focusing on teaching possibilities. To work concretely for an inclusive school that is willing to encounter a heterogeneous group entails at bottom a pedagogy focusing on its mission and relations (Karlsudd, 2002).

The chief importance of the teacher's work on relations is to promote a higher goal achievement that benefits both the social and the cognitive development of their pupils (Frelin, 2010). Most of the criteria of professionalism are fulfilled by a teacher that is human, i.e. somebody who is able to face differences in a tolerant unprejudiced manner by keeping up an open communication with the pupils. Relations characterized by equality and differences need not

lead to problems, but can rather be seen as an educational potential. In the end, the job of the teacher involves being able to cope with the relational dimension. This should therefore take high priority in teacher education. Arguments like these emphasize the need for focusing on relational perspectives in the education (Frelin, 2010) of leisure-time pedagogues.

Facing Reality

Naturally, there are differences among leisure-time centre activities. Placing children in need of special support in integrated leisure-time centre activities by one municipality placed may by another be viewed as being no part of the mission of regular leisure-time centres (Karlsudd, 2012). Some centres where clear fundamental values prevail, including an attitude that may be defined as manifesting an inclusive culture, find it natural to receive children in need of special support among their activities. For their staff parents' wishes that their children should attend an ordinary leisure-time centre are met and for their management inclusiveness is viewed as a basic principle for the centre activities. In other centres this attitude is far from prevalent; they have instead adopted a segregating approach.

However, there are clear signs that the development goes towards greater exclusiveness in special needs education. A questionnaire study made in two counties (19 municipalities) in 2011 found that the number of pupils with cognitive disabilities in segregated activities had increased by 375 % since the same measurement made 13 years earlier. The number of segregated leisure-time centres had increased by 266 % and the children included in integrated activities now form part of much bigger groups (Karlsudd, 2011a). Judging by these figures it appears as if leisure-time centres have lost a great deal of their responsibility to include all children in joint activities. The increasing segregation in school has been replicated in leisure-time centre activities. It is quite obvious that the economy and organizational restructuring have played a crucial role in this context. Child group size and changes in attitudes towards the educational mission are further reasons. It is natural to ask oneself whether the relational approach of special needs education and the ideology which should, according to control documents, guide the activities of leisure-time centres have weakened.

Educational Practice Located at the University

Teacher educators' main assignment is to try to challenge their students by confronting them and asking difficult questions that may have a far-reaching transforming and disturbing effect (Biesta, 2006). The education can start only when the individual is willing to take the risk of changing. It is a process involving explorative questions that can reveal who you are and how you stand in relation to different phenomena and dilemmas. This approach has been the guideline of the project described in this article. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for participants in occupational education to turn into objects that have to be exposed to being trained in reproduction and adaptability (Alsheimer, 2004). The outcome is an instrumental education counteracting erudition and critical thinking. This view of knowledge as consumption may make the teacher student better acquainted with prescriptive than with explorative teaching (Persson, 2007). Scientific reflection and practical professional work are not integrated during such education. Education based on development-oriented learning may, on the other hand, promote a climate that encourages critical reflection and tolerance of uncertainty and differences of opinion (Ellström, 2004). The ability for critical and analytical thinking tells of curiosity about variation and diversity. This preference has been the guideline in the current project thanks to its clear link to degree objectives like evaluation ability and attitude.

Aim

The aim of the study was to make visible how the teaching and learning of values and attitudes can be promoted in educational practice, as well as to examine student views on including values for leisure-time centre work as stated in policy documents.

Methodology of Research

From the very beginning leisure-time pedagogue education has given plenty of room for knowledge about children who have for various reasons run into difficulties. Hence leisure-time pedagogues (educators) have adopted the role of being the representative of “exposed children” (Karlsudd, 2011a). For this reason it might be interesting to examine how present leisure-time pedagogues-to-be look upon their teaching mission. Do they have a relational orientation or has the categorical approach taken over? What ideals and intentions have today’s students taken to heart and how do they view their chances of living up to these? The study thus involves an explicit emancipatory interest in knowledge which can be linked to critical theory and normative analyse.

Normative Point

The study is clearly linked to normative theoretical point as it emanates from an a priori determined value basis, the principle of equal value. This is a normative axiom emphasizing the equal value of human beings. A normative analysis according to Lundquist (1998), becomes meaningful when, for example, searching for specific requirements on value bases applicable within education. The very focus of this study is on democracy values linked to the equal value principle.

On a scientific basis, the normative analysis thus aims at studying what is desirable and how this can be justified, which requires clearly specified values. The point of departure of this study is thus the assessment of values and demands on responsibility, such as not discriminating against students on account of their ability and performance, which means that the underlying starting point is that there are always values interwoven with our use of language and that these affect the way professionals think and act in their professional role.

The normative value analysis can, according to Badersten (2006), visualize and clarify the meaning of the various value statements made in the material as well as problematizing how these can be interpreted and understood in relation to the study’s specified values and principles. Hence, the value-specific contents of teacher students’ statements can, for example, be linked to professional ethical awareness. The normative analysis starts from a priori formulated authoritative value premises which should be maintained and paid regard to. To conclude, the interest in a normative analysis increases if it is related to reality by reasoning about concrete values and their practical consequences, as has been the target of this study.

A Narrative Approach through Written Meta-Reflections

The study has a narrative approach in trying to capture a deeper and richer picture of how teacher students look upon their future educational mission of facing differences in their pupils. Goodson (2005), in problematizing professional knowledge development, also highlights the narrative perspective, claiming that we can use the narrative as a basis to proceed from individual towards contextual knowledge.

The implementation described above is based on both an individual and a collective dialogue, whose inspiration is taken from the dialogue seminar method, which, according to Hammaren (1999), aims at creating a reflective process. This process involves that students are given the opportunity to test and retest their understanding by confronting different experi-

ences with one another. There is also a link to transformative learning, which, as emphasized by Mezirow (2000), can develop a critically reflective approach whereby students' previous experience and knowledge are exposed to a challenging process by means of theoretical concepts and models.

Implementation and Selection

During the third term of the programme the students were therefore given an assignment within the compulsory "Special needs pedagogical attitudes 7.5 higher education credits" course, an assignment that went through a step-by-step process individually as well as in joint seminars. Its purpose was to develop an insight into the challenges of the relational perspective with a link to professional leisure-time centre activities. On having read the compulsory literature (Aspelin & Persson, 2011; Ahlberg, 2007; Rosenqvist, 2007) each student formulated a written draft for presenting the texts for one another during a following seminar.

In the introductory part of the assignment the students analyzed activities from a socially oriented perspective and from that of efficient knowledge acquisition (Aspelin & Persson, 2011). To this was linked the task of describing and reflecting on the difference between the categorical and relational perspectives of special needs education (Ahlberg, 2007; Asp-Onsjö, 2010). The students were admonished to give concrete examples of how relational pedagogy can be achieved in connection with the activities, contents and attitudes of leisure-time centre work.

After each seminar the students reflected in first-person by writing something similar to a meta reflection on how they had experienced the challenges of the relational perspective. In the descriptions, examples were given of concrete professional pedagogical actions more or less strongly connected with a special needs pedagogical approach in daily leisure-time centre work. This approach constitutes a variation that mediates different values and attitudes to the future profession (Willén Lundgren, 2010; Karlsudd, 2011b).

The task was performed by 34 students in a sample of 24 women and 10 men. The study empirics consist of the students' written meta reflections comprising a text of 34 A4 pages.

A Critical Dissensus-Oriented Analysis

The study's processing and analysis procedure are closely linked to critical theory through its explicit commitment to values and strong interest in issues of professional ethics. The processing of the study material is here viewed as more of a reflective activity, by directing the attention towards hidden aspects and offering alternative interpretations during the actual research process. Alvesson and Deetz (2000) describe that the purpose of an open dissensus orientation within critical research is to achieve a dialogic learning process, which rests on the three elements of insight, criticism and transformative re-evaluation. The first element entails that the interpretation should provide insights into hidden and less apparent aspects of the phenomenon under study. The second involves a critical demonstration of what is problematic regarding these aspects. A transformative re-evaluation, finally, is intended to stimulate to practical understanding facilitating change. Consequently, the analysis and interpretation performed has consequently had an explicit dissensus character striving at modulating, perspectivizing and varying habitual attitudes. It is to be hoped that this can contribute to building a more open consensus about the problems of the study.

As for assessing the sincerity of student statements it is difficult to state with certainty whether the descriptions and reflections are totally valid. However, in the study the instructors following discussions in seminars and on more informal occasions, we assess that the students felt confident enough to sincerely express their thoughts and views. The students' statements in the material are overwhelmingly strongly expressed, containing values that can be coupled to solidarity with the weak and vulnerable. It is hard to determine whether the students have

reinforced already established notions about values during their education, or if these values are the result of educational efforts. This issue has also been problematized by Lortie (1975) in his classic study. The fact that we as teachers also assumed the role of researchers has not, in our view, affected the study, because of the close interplay between these two roles in this type of teaching.

Results of Research

In a first inductive analysis of the meta reflections made by the students four categories emerged clearly: the leisure-time centre as a democratic venue, the ability of leisure-time pedagogy to put into practice an inclusive work method, the children's right to learning and development and the leisure-time pedagogue approach to relational pedagogy. This is the structure largely followed in this chapter. The intentions of the policy documents and the tradition on which leisure-time centre education rests emerge clearly from the student texts. Quite a few express a longing to approach their future professional work relationally and inclusively.

The Leisure-Time Centre as a Democratic Venue

The values that, according to the students, should permeate activities are clearly expressed in various formulations about democracy and participation. Expressions like "everyone should take part", "learning from each other", "avoid categorizing, stamping and separating" are examples of the informants' pedagogical preferences. It is frequently expressed that a heterogeneous group makes a natural whole.

There are plenty of statements that can be linked to professional ethical awareness of the social and political mission, with concrete examples to emphasize the personal and existential responsibility for furthering a humane leisure-time centre education.

"Understanding and respect can be built up"

"In daycare they know who you are"

"We can make a striking difference in social aims like involvement, empathy and solidarity".

Other formulations contain words like "acceptance" and expressions like "we all have our faults" or "making small adjustments". With regard to the last expression one can notice some dissonance in the argumentation, in that there is a difference between accepting a child as it is and accepting its faults. Taking notice of faults and then adopting an attitude of acceptance may indicate a narrow view of normality.

The Ability of Leisure-Time Pedagogy to Put into Practice an Inclusive Work Method

The work methods advocated by the students are based on an extended view of the knowledge concept. The informants mark clearly that talks and aesthetic forms of expression make an important foundation for the development. Visual art, drama and music are regarded as important leisure-time centre tools for promoting a positive development. Creative ability and practical knowledge should thus be assigned a higher value than today, according to some students. Distrust of school activities is shown in several student answers:

"School is square in many ways and the leisure-time centre is to my mind more like a circle"

"Fancy feeling the smell of new-baked bread in the leisure-time centre instead of sitting in a cold naked canteen with an empty echo".

Creating trusting relations with pupils is important, according to the teachers-to-be, thus clearly implying a socially oriented activity. The importance is emphasized of making room for

“a diversity of learning styles”, “listening”, “talking” and “cooperating” in day-to-day work. A few respondents want to defend children’s own choices and leisure time (free activities), emphasizing its highly meaningful value for pupils’ well-being, as illustrated by the following quotes:

“Leisure time should be genuinely free”

“Let the children enjoy and allow them just to be when they come to daycare”

Nearly all texts support the notion of inclusion. Words and expressions like “cooperating”, “not branding or separating”, “mixing is good” “they all learn from each other”, “social community”, “inclusiveness”, “respecting others” and “individualizing” occur frequently. In the quotation below, a student gives example to how a leisure-time teacher works through an inclusive approach.

“Swimming is difficult for Lisa and she feels outside when the others swim. But when the leisure-time pedagogues calls out: ‘I want to see the nicest paddling today when we go swimming’, she becomes included in the game in a humorous way.”

There are many who claim that what is regarded as problems at school does not create any difficulty at the leisure-time centre, which may thus be referred to a relational perspective within special needs education which links difficulties to the inability of the organization to cope with differences among pupils.

“We didn’t perceive this problem at all in daycare, but there was a nice boy the children wanted to play with while we were in the background to support if need be, but that wasn’t necessary.”

The final comment presented within this category may be considered a typical attitude towards inclusive activities.

“It’s not up to the child to adapt. I’m quite convinced that all children can take part in what happens at the centre.”

The Children’s Right to Learning and Development

That every individual child is unique and has various needs is strongly emphasized. That children learn and develop at different rates is also highlighted.

A large number of informants point out that children today are subjected to plenty of pressure and stress, which in their view is the result of too much focus on efficient knowledge. One informant is very critical of the sometimes exaggerated testing hysteria prevailing in some schools.

“Stamping, stamping, they’d better start working at the POST OFFICE”

Statements from a few informants show traces of a more traditional knowledge-efficient approach to leisure-time centre work and also reflections to the effect that pupils’ difficulties are at bottom viewed as an individual deficiency, which should, according to a more distancing subject-object relation, be “corrected” by the teacher.

“It’s up to the teachers to focus on their knowledge and the competence they are expected to teach the pupils.”

Starting from her own experiences one respondent turned out to be dissatisfied with the socially oriented activities she had encountered in junior and middle school. Since her reading and writing difficulties were neglected by the teachers she had “a minor shock” when encountering secondary school culture. This has set its mark on her choice of profession and in the direction of her studies, as confirmed by the following quotation:

“I want to help the children so that they don’t go through the same hell as I went through”.

Some of the students highlight stories revealing how they themselves were humiliated and belittled in school. Expressions like “the interests of the children should guide”, “starting from the children’s level”, “everybody is unique”, “you are OK the way you are” and “we are not steeped in the same mold” are some of the expressions suggesting a relational perspective to special needs education which involves the professional ethics principle that a teacher must not discriminate a pupil on the basis of ability and performance.

The Leisure-Time Pedagogue Approach to Relational Pedagogy

Some examples in the material may be coupled to the intention to advocate relational pedagogy in leisure-time centres. This circumstance may be supposed to reflect the cognitive and social mission of teachers’ professional practice. The concrete pedagogical examples mentioned by the informants emphasize that the strength of leisure-time centres lies in their ability to build their daily work together with the pupils on informal learning. This can be done, for example, at meals and in planned activities like baking. Two other students point out that leisure-time centres thanks to their practical activities have a high learning potential linked to mathematics and current reading development.

“Their games are an excellent chance to help pupils to a better understanding of maths”.

“Why not pick up a toy catalogue and cut out words and letters? At the same time I am aware as a teacher that this means starting from an analytical whole-word method.”

Finally, there is one respondent who stresses the importance of the balance between the cognitive and the social mission.

Discussion

Analyzing the texts from the concepts of the socially oriented and the knowledge-efficient schools, practically all statements represent the former. The informants’ meta reflections contain a number of relational expressions demonstrating the importance of working for inclusive activities together with the children. The starting point of most statements in the material is a relational approach within special needs education and its importance in facilitating the encounter with pupils’ divergences in a heterogeneous group. Further, many of the students share their own experiences of the importance of an extended view of the normality concept, which may counteract discriminating attitudes in pedagogical work containing links to ability and performance. This leads to the interesting question of how crucial personal experiences from school have been in guiding the choice of professional education. Do the majority of the students have negative experiences from school and have therefore chosen leisure-time centres for their future work? The result shows that the informants’ explicit intentions as active professionals are overwhelmingly linked to social aims and values. A few students emphasize the potentiality of leisure-time centres to integrate their work with social and cognitive goals, an approach that is in line with relational pedagogy (Aspelin & Persson, 2011).

The students feel pride in their future profession. This is a value whose implicit meaning may be that the leisure-time teachers-to-be think that their possibility to face children’s differ-

ences in their work is greater than for schoolteachers. One might envisage this distinction as a possible bridge for teachers in the joint educational system to get together in order to become more successful in their mission. Since the curriculum is shared between leisure-time centres and schools the former may form an important complement to school activities. An alternative interpretation is that this distinction runs the risk of cementing negative lock-in effects, for example, that leisure-time pedagogues look upon themselves as a counterculture rather than as a complement to school, which may obstruct the professionals' joint mission of working for the equal education of our pupils (Skolverket, 2007).

Another aspect in the material is that some students make references to negative experiences from their own school years. This is a way of implying that leisure-time teachers will be able to help all tricky pupils and that they will be looked up to as teachers. This is a rather unproblematic and naive approach to the future profession. A further approach demonstrated in the material has sooner the character of a dialogue, involving that the student points to the importance of communicative and democratic competence. This means emphasizing ethical aspects and professional actions from the point of view of conscious intersubjectivity, i.e., not as an individual project, but as a common social and societal mission appropriate to the civil servant role. Similar results emerge from a study whose empirics were taken from teachers-to-be in comprehensive and upper secondary schools (Willén Lundgren, 2010).

Although leisure-time centres have their own specific requirements (Skolverket, 2007), they follow the same general targets as compulsory schools (Skolverket, 2011). In the new Education Act valid from July 1, 2011, it is stated that these centres are expected to stimulate development and learning by building their education on a holistic view of the pupils and their needs, as a complement to school. This indicates that their activities are not circumscribed by a narrow categorical perspective, focusing primarily on efficient knowledge. The complementary support provided by these centres, as illustrated by the students in the material, primarily rests on a socially oriented approach. These concretely described professional actions are thus closely linked to activities at large with democratic values like solidarity and equality at the forefront (Karlsudd, 2002).

Conclusions

Whether an overwhelmingly social orientation of leisure-time centres emanating from a relational attitude can prevent problems in school is an interesting aspect. To approach this question it could be meaningful to give students an assignment close to established practice, where they all have to present concrete individual examples from their placement period illustrating learning situations, which they consider characterized by relational pedagogy. They would also have to portray concrete didactic actions in the daily teaching practice of a leisure-time centre. Without doubt the leisure-time teachers-to-be demonstrate a strong belief in and willingness to working with a relational approach in spite of the adverse winds that prevail.

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