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obstacles to social justice?

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Notes from the chair:

Leisure-time pedagogical norms – obstacles to social justice?

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Nordic research has documented how majoritarian (heterosexual middleclass white) norms still prevail in education (Heikkinen, 2016) causing children and youth to experience marginalization, stigmatization, and discrimination with the risk of impeding their well-being and life-trajectories.

Thus, one may argue that Nordic legislation and mainstream pedagogical values promoting equality and inclusion appear as truisms standing in the way of social justice (Askland, 2016; Clarup et al., 2020; Hamilton & Padovan-Özdemir, 2020). Hence, there is a need to reflect on the role of leisure-time pedagogy in relation to social justice.

Ideals (norms) in leisure-time pedagogy

To be able to discuss leisure-time pedagogy in a social justice perspective, it seems requisite to outline key educational ideals (or norms) sedimented in the historical development of leisure-time pedagogy. In this case, I will focus on the Danish context, although I assume that similar ideological developments and sedimentations can be observed in other Nordic countries (Hjalmarsson & Odenbring, 2020). Of course, this is up for discussion and further investigation.

Youth as a pedagogical problem and target group of pedagogical intervention is commonly considered a consequence of two intersecting historical transformations in Western societies in the late 19th century. On an ideational level, a naturalist and romantic idea of the innocent child emerged and intersected with the rapid industrialization, which called for more a skilled work force. This resulted in formalized primary education followed by a ban on child labour in 1913 (Agerschou et al., 2021, p. 6). Consequently, children and youngsters suddenly found themselves rewarded with free time after school hours roaming the streets without adult supervision.

The pedagogical response was to first establish asylums for the youngest children. Later youth clubs were created in order to prevent youth to be attracted by crime or end up lonely (Schultz et al., 2021, p. 30). In any case, the pedagogical problem construction rested with the romantic understanding of the innocent non-adult in risk of being deprived without adult guidance. These initial developments and pedagogical orientations at the turn of the 20th century instigated what could be labeled as 100 years of pedagogical struggles to ensure that youth's free time be spent in a safe, meaningful, and civilized manner.

Agerschou, Larsen & Bak summarise this more than century long pedagogical development by identifying what they call three competing "civilising fantasies" (2021, p. 9) on how to guide youth's free time. By the end of the 19th century, youth were met with compensating care and offered home-like activities that would socialize the youth to inhabit gendered roles and functions in the home (Agerschou et al., 2021, p. 8). After World War II, progressive educational and pedagogical efforts were strongly re-oriented towards community building and democratization to foster youth's self-determination and critical thinking qualified by pedagogical activities (Agerschou et al., 2021, p. 8). From the beginning of the new millennium, leisure-time pedagogy seems to be impacted by the imperative of life-long learning that requires pedagogical activities to support youth's optimized learning processes and performance (Agerschou et al., 2021, p. 9).

Important to reiterate is that these civilizing fantasies have not replaced each other, rather they have overlaid each other and, thus, are found alongside each other in contemporary leisure-time pedagogical practice.

Nevertheless, there seems to be a tendency in the literature suggesting the prevalence of the second democracy-oriented civilizing ideal. Accordingly, this civilizing ideal is described with an internal contradiction mirroring late modernity's strong individualization process. With late modern individualization comes freedom as well as responsibility; you are free to become whatever you like, as long as you act responsibly in terms of securing yourself a good life (Schultz et al., 2021, pp. 35–37).

In particular, the science of social-psychology (since the 1950s) seems to have worked as a prism through which to understand and address the above-mentioned internal conflict of youth individualization. In a social-psychological perspective, youth in their leisure time were and are considered a problem if they appear marginalized, seem to be lacking personal competences, or resist participating in proper leisure activities (Schultz et al., 2021).

The social-psychological doctrine has transpired into a civilizing ideal whereby leisure-time pedagogy ought to bring the youth to participate and contribute to common activities as this will connect their “self-responsibility ... with a peer responsibility in a communal process that is oriented towards a societal responsibility” (Schultz et al., 2021, p. 41, my translation). As such, leisure-time pedagogy is imagined to be able to bridge the internal contradiction of late modern individualization.

In the same line of thinking, differences in the conditions for individualization are acknowledged which is then translated into a professional imperative of being curious and explorative about the life that young people actually live (Schultz et al., 2021, p. 35) in order to support their civilization into society by way of pedagogically levelling the different conditions of individualisation.

One could argue that it is exactly this leisure-time pedagogical ideal of civilizing in terms of bringing the individualized youth as close to society by means of democratic interpellation that calls for reflection in regard to social justice. In other words, in what way are the different conditions of individualization levelled?

Notions of social justice

Social justice is not restricted to questions of material deprivation or differences in income, but considers also other aspects of social life, such as culture, identities, environments, and epistemologies (Schenker et al., 2019, p. 127). Nevertheless, it is well-established to think of social justice in terms of the distribution of resources. In educational and pedagogical settings, one can think of resources in terms of, e.g., knowledge, grades, attention, help, care, and respect. In this way, educators may provide differential learning opportunities and socialization experiences (Resh & Sabbagh, 2016, p. 349).

Resh and Sabbagh (2016, p. 350) identify three principles of just distribution of resources. First, the liberal principle of just resource distribution entails that education and all its resources are made accessible to all children and youth. In a liberal way of thinking, the accessibility will grant all children and youth equal opportunities to strive and succeed. Second, the need-based principle of

just distribution of resources involves measures of affirmative action and compensatory pedagogies to level and balance uneven conditions for taking advantage of the educational offer available. Third, the equity principle by which resources are distributed according to everyone's effort and ability to ensure equal outcomes.

In many ways, these principles of distribution to ensure social justice work within a limited understanding of education and injustice. Resh & Sabbagh argue that socially just education not only distributes resources in a socially just way, but it also acknowledges its role in upholding unjust structures and its role in the transformation towards a more socially just world. This entails "locating learning and its outcomes in a structure of justice that extends to life within complex societies" (2016, pp. 357, referencing Budd 2023).

In this broader contextual view of social justice and injustice, inequality is attributed to societal structures rather than difference(s).

Norm-critique – a perspective rather than a pedagogy for social justice

According to Resh & Sabbagh, socially just pedagogy is characterized by being critical towards norms of "schooling and the societal arrangements that support it" (2016, p. 358). Reading Monica McDaniel's critique of "positive youth development work", we can understand how such a critical approach challenges hitherto prevalent leisure-time pedagogical ideal's inner tension of aligning self-responsibility with societal responsibility as this entails young people being "molded by adults into productive members of society. This mold is one of the dominant cultural framework: the straight, white, middle-class, able-bodied, cisgendered, [Scandinavian]-born, Christian man" (McDaniel, 2017, p. 136).

A norm-critical perspective on leisure-time pedagogy offers exactly an opportunity for observing the social effects of the dominant cultural framework (i.e., the prevailing norms) by exploring who is privileged or sanctioned, respectively, by the norm. Applying such a perspective challenges the liberal notion of social justice; i.e., access to resources and opportunities is not enough if the good life – the normal position – is still dependent on one's alignment with the prevailing norms.

Thus, it can be argued that norm-critique in many ways runs counter to liberal versions of norm-critical pedagogy that celebrates differences as a resource for the wider community (Clarup et al., 2020, p. 24) and something to be tolerated by the majority (Taguchi, 2011, p. 178). Hence, note that differences in liberal adaptations of norm-critique are equated with social identities positioned at the margins or even in opposition to the Western cultural framework referenced above (cf. Staunæs, 2006; Taguchi, 2011, p. 176).

Similarly, it can be argued that inclusion-oriented pedagogies that aim to bring outsider youth closer and into healthy communities are based on the same understanding of the cultural framework. In other words, the logic of inclusion entails the design of a pedagogical environment that is broad and encompassing enough to include all youth, often assisted by affirmative actions and compensatory pedagogy (Clarup et al., 2020, p. 24). Hence, the prevailing norms are not altered substantially, they are merely "expanded" or made more flexible (cf. Taguchi, 2011, p. 176).

Lene Lenz Taguchi illuminates this as a core problem of norm-critique in a social justice perspective arguing that the application of poststructuralist deconstructive analyses of pedagogical

practices and interactions most often leaves us with an accumulation of possible subject positions, rather than exploring the production and transformation of non-binary subject positions. Hereby, poststructuralist norm-critique runs the risk of departing from the notion of difference, despite its focus on norms instead of the othered subjects (Taguchi, 2011, pp. 180–181).

Alternatively, Taguchi suggests that norm-critique departs from a post-humanist notion of difference – not as different from something else – but as “the effect of interactions in-between” humans as well as non-humans (2011, p. 185). According to Taguchi, this will allow us to explore the becoming of things and subjectivities, rather than the things and subjectivities in themselves.

However tempting and hopeful this ontological reorientation in our exploration of difference might be, I will remain skeptical regarding its potential for furthering social justice. Disregarding *difference from something else*, focusing entirely on the process of becoming seems to subscribe to a rather liberal notion of social justice that runs the danger of responsabilizing individuals for making the best out of the interactions they find themselves in. Furthermore, disregarding *difference from something else* and epistemologically evading hierarchizations human differences make it consequently impossible to document and speak of social injustices.

Instead, I argue for the insistence on norm-critique as a *perspective* rather than a pedagogy. In this way, we can avoid the reductionist conceptualization of norm-critique and retain its critical potential (Björkman et al., 2021, p. 191).

Insisting on norm-critique as a perspective on and in leisure-time pedagogy allows for the infinite questioning of our common sense, invisible norms, and taken-for-granted normalcy that may illuminate how “oppression can play out in our lives unnoticed and unchallenged” (Kumashiro, 2009, p. 37). Hence, I do acknowledge the ontological instability of subjectivities, yet, I also recognise that not all “bodies” engage in the emergent construction and transformation of subjectivities on equal footing.

Thus, in a social justice perspective I argue that norm-critical analyses enable not only the identification of prevailing norms and how they are upheld by practices, pedagogues and socio-cultural structures, but also the illumination of how these norms have social and material effects in concrete pedagogical situations and on the lives of different groups of youth. This of course requires us to pay attention to difference and how it is produced and hierarchised by means of e.g. pedagogical evaluations and problematizations. Difference matters, even if we think it should not.

Furthermore, norm-critical analyses that focus on how norms privilege and sanction different bodies/subjectivities enable critical documentation of how pedagogical resources are distributed unequally in leisure-time pedagogical settings.

However, as seen in the findings from the two Danish research and development projects, *Normkritisk evalueringskultur i dagtilbud* (2019-2022) and *Normkritiske perspektiver i fritidspædagogikken* (2022-2023) to conduct norm-critical analyses and take pedagogical actions based on these analyses is not an easy task for leisure-time pedagogues. Thus, I welcome the standing critique of norm-critique pointing to the risk of individualising the responsibility of social change for the sake of social justice inasmuch as norm-critique is often practiced in a form of self-reflection among educators (Björkman et al., 2021, p. 186) based on the premise and expectation that the conscious subject can change unjust social structures and norms. At least two problems

arise with this premise. One, how can a subject become conscious of the very same norms and structures that subjectivise them? Two, why should a subject privileged by the norms and structures feel inclined to change them?

Engaging with the first critical question, I would like to turn our attention to the fact that the same problem goes for critical scholarship. We are all subjectivised and interpellated by dominating structures, discourses, and norms, yet, we keep on objectivising the very same structures, discourses, and norms in our effort to understand and explain the socio-cultural and socio-material production and reproduction of social injustices. A way to advance the application of norm-critique in pedagogical practice would be to move beyond reflections emerging from and centering on the practioner-I and, instead, encourage the practioner-we to objectivise their collective practice and investigate how their practice is governed by socio-cultural and socio-material structures, discourses, and norms and at the same time feeds into the reproduction of the very same structures, discourses, and norms.

The second critical question seems to address perhaps the biggest obstacle to social justice. Hence, critical race scholars have already addressed the majority's reluctance to combat e.g. racism unless their interests converge with the interests of the minority (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2017).

Accordingly, this symposium addresses the question of how to make majoritarian norms a visible object of investigation in leisure-time pedagogy to consciously and imaginatively build more socially just pedagogical environments.

The overall aim of this symposium is to sensitize social education research to the importance of norms and discuss how to develop social justice-oriented leisure-time pedagogies that may problematize, but also move beyond existing "civilizing fantasies" in current leisure-time pedagogy. Accordingly, the symposium explores alternative research and leisure-time pedagogical paths for promoting social justice beyond liberal or inclusion-oriented notions of equality.

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