

The emerging concepts of participation and belonging in social pedagogy

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Abstract

During the last few decades, the concepts of participation and belonging has frequently been used within the social welfare field in general, and within the field of disability research specifically. Additionally, in Scandinavia the concept of participation has become increasingly used in social work and social pedagogy programmes at universities. However, there's rather little known about how participation can be understood and related to social pedagogy, since the concept has a broad range of meanings, e.g. a sense of belonging. This paper aims to identify and discuss understandings of participation and belonging with relevance for social work and social pedagogy. Empirical illustrations have been gathered with ethnographical methods and analysed in accordance with an interpretive tradition. It is argued that the concept of participation can be attributed to different meanings in different ideological, theoretical, and institutional practice contexts (e.g. schools that offer special needs programmes, the transition to working life, online social networking). Consequently, it's a challenge to provide adequate definitions of the concept. The inference drawn is that the aspect of belonging as it relates to social participation can be attributed to its particular importance for social pedagogy. An implication for professional practice is the need to pay attention to alternative identifications that are not based on notions of a stable, constant sense of belonging to a categorical group.

Keywords: participation, belonging, social pedagogy, disability research

Introduction

During the last few decades the concept of participation has been increasingly used within different fields of research, education, and practice (Adair et al., 2018), especially in the fields of social work, social pedagogy, and disability research. However, it's noteworthy that common global and domestic definitions of participation often have different connotations. Furthermore, it is not uncommon that the term is not defined at all.

Participation in policy and legislative contexts

Common definitions of participation can be found in internationally prominent policy documents in the field of disability. For instance, The European Disability Strategy 2010-2020 emphasizes the importance of 'achiev[ing] full participation of people with disabilities in society by: 1) enabling them to enjoy all the benefits of EU citizenship; 2) removing administrative and attitudinal barriers to full and equal participation; 3) providing quality community-based services, including access to personal assistance' (European Commission, 2010, p 6). Similarly, The United Nations Convention on Rights for Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, Article 3) accentuates 'Full and effective participation and inclusion in society' (UN, 2006, p 5). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, Article 23) stipulates that 'State parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community' (UN, 2010, p 22).

Furthermore, the World Health Organisation (WHO) defines participation in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) as '*Involvement* in a life situation' (WHO, 2013, p 8) in relation to health conditions, activities, body functions and structures, as well as contextual, environmental, and personal factors. In the early ICF preparation work (WHO 2001)¹, it was highlighted that the concept of 'involvement' could be understood as 'taking part', 'being included', 'engaged in an area of life', 'being accepted', and 'having access to needed recourses'. It was furthermore emphasized that involvement should be separated from

¹ ICIDH-2 Final draft, December 2001 (WHO, 2001, p 13).

a subjective 'sense of belonging'. Although this latter aspect is not addressed in the ICF, it is important to emphasize the relevance of the dimension of belonging to the concept of participation. However, it should not be assumed that belonging automatically is something inherent in participation, but rather that belonging can be understood as something that results from participation.

In Sweden, there have been numerous of bills and evaluations of the 'Swedish Act Concerning Support and Services for Persons with Certain Functional Impairments' (LSS) that have frequently addressed the concept of participation (*delaktighet*). In early preparatory legislative work it was stated that participation should be understood as 'social integration' (SOU 1991:46). The LSS law text later stated that 'The activities pursuant to this Act shall promote equality of living conditions and full participation in the life of the community [...] The objective shall be to promote the individual's ability to live as others do' (SFS 1993:387 – Section 5). The Social Service Act (SoL) also mentions participation in the portal section: 'Public social service shall, on a basis of democracy and solidarity, promote people's economic and social security, equality of living conditions and active participation in the life of the community' (SFS 2001:453 – Section 1).

The LSS and SoL law texts can be considered rather close in meaning to those put forward by the UNCRPD, i.e. 'accessibility' as a prerequisite for participation. Since the early 1990s, the Swedish disability policy has been based upon the assumption that an accessible society is assumed to create conditions for increased participation among all citizens of that society. In the UNCRC there is a focus on children's rights and participation in terms of 'influence and shared decision-making' (Shier, 2001). The Convention text is largely based on Arnstein's 'ladder of participation', which has been developed since the late 1960s. In this respect, the concept of participation appears to have a variety of connotations in different ideological and legislative contexts. Consequently, not all definitions take into account the social dimensions of participation. Additionally, the Swedish term 'delaktighet' seems to have a broader range of meanings than participation. Therefore, participation may not be appropriate as a direct translation of 'delaktighet', especially since the concept of 'delaktighet' – at least on an ideological level – often comprises connotations of 'take part in' AND 'be a part of'. This means that 'delaktighet' easily can be understood in terms of a sense of belonging, which will be shown in the illustrative cases below.

Participation in social work and social pedagogy

In conjunction with these global and conventional uses of the concept, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) highlights the concept of participation in their ethical principles for social workers: ‘Social workers work toward building the self-esteem and capabilities of people, promoting their full involvement and participation in all aspects of decisions and actions that affect their lives’ (IFSW, 2018, Principle No. 5 – Promoting Right to Participation). The IFSW (2014) also establish a global definition of the social work profession: ‘Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people’. In addition, the IFSW emphasize some characteristics of social work knowledge:

Social work is both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, and draws on a wide array of scientific theories and research. ‘Science’ is understood in this context in its most basic meaning as ‘knowledge’. Social work draws on its own constantly developing theoretical foundation and research, as well as theories from other human sciences, including but not limited to community development, social pedagogy, administration, anthropology, ecology, economics, education, management, nursing, psychiatry, psychology, public health, and sociology. The uniqueness of social work research and theories is that they are applied and emancipatory. Much of social work research and theory is co-constructed with service users in an interactive, dialogic process and therefore informed by specific practice environments (IFSW, 2014).

In a similar way, Hämäläinen (2012) describes social pedagogy as a functional system of science, education, and practice. The author also stipulates the concept of participation in relation to social pedagogy: ‘The basic idea of social pedagogy is to promote people’s social functioning, inclusion, participation, social identity and social competence as members of society. Its particular terms of reference apply to the problems people have in integration and life management in different phases of the lifespan’ (Böhnisch, 1997 cited in Hämäläinen 2003, p. 76). This definition of social pedagogy aligns with the above IFSW definition of social work. However, Hämäläinen (2003, p. 75) stresses that different apprehensions of social pedagogy and social work claim that they 1) completely differ from each other, 2) are identical, or 3) complement each other. Furthermore, it is said that previous efforts to identify social pedagogy with social work have often narrowed the understanding of social pedagogical theoretical self-conception, reducing it to merely professional issues (in formal settings, e.g. social services or

the Student Health Office). Nevertheless, a broader perspective on social pedagogy can also comprise non-professional, social, and educational activities and social actions in formal, non-formal, or informal settings (Hämäläinen, 2012, p. 10), which will be illustrated in the findings section of this paper.

Social work theorist Malcom Payne (2015) notes that social pedagogy emphasizes the social aspects of education that can affect the lives of underprivileged population groups, counter social exclusion, and develop a social identity with the goal of achieving personal and social development through problem-solving work (and not only by dealing with personal problems).

The rationale of this paper is based on the concept of participation and how it has had rather different connotations in both policy and social welfare practice in general. The above mentioned, often normative, ideological and/or ethical connotations of participation are open for interpretation in different contexts (research, education and practice).

From ideological to analytical meanings of participation

Within the field of disability – and especially the field of intellectual disability research – the emergence of participation in the Nordic welfare states is closely intertwined with the decommissioning of major care institutions in the 1980s (Gustavsson et al., 2005). Scandinavian researchers have highlighted the lack of clarity and vagueness that sometimes characterizes key concepts in the field of disability (e.g. Molin, 2004). To a large extent, this is linked to the conceptual, parallel ideological usage of the word. The ambiguity that often implies ideologically and politically anchored terms makes them work well in that they can cover many people's quite different needs, visions, and requests for change. Historically, however, one can see how new concepts such as normalization, integration and (later) participation were introduced, often mainly in an ideological-political context, and then sharpened with more precise implications for researchers in the following decades.

Over the last few decades the importance of increased participation in society has been – and is still being – discussed in both research and everyday practice contexts. However, Gustavsson (2004) argues that the 'language of participation' is our current era speaking of old (and partially unresolved) problems. He exemplifies this by referring to developments in the field of disability

and how the 1970s' and 1980s' focus on normalization and integration did not achieve the desired objectives. People with and without disabilities are still living different and separate lives – and often with unequal living conditions. Gustavsson points out that the 'integration project' – i.e. in terms of society's minorities being expected to adapt to an (unchanged) societal majority – required new concepts that could contribute to changing societal conditions. In the early 1990s, concepts such as accessibility, participation and inclusion became increasingly prominent.

In Scandinavia, as well as internationally, the concept of participation can be said to originate from two different types of partly coincidental, but at the same time divergent, traditions: a 'habilitation tradition' and a 'social exclusion tradition' (Gustavsson, 2004). The former – the habilitation tradition – has historically been focused on correcting and/or compensating for individual deficiencies or shortcomings. Participation in this tradition is often about paying attention to and 'training' the individual's skills and capabilities so that the person can participate in community life. Contrary to this mainly individual concept of participation, there's also the fact that many people with disabilities experience social exclusion in contacts with the surrounding community. When society is not adapted so that everyone can be part of the community, the conditions for interpersonal interaction in community life are reduced. We can then talk about a 'social participation' concept, where numerous definitions include the fulfilment of a social role and 'involvement in activities that are intrinsically social and occur in a societally-defined context' (Chang, Coster, and Helfrich, 2013, p. 1792). English terms like social participation, social integration and social inclusion are often used when participation is approached as a more social phenomenon. These social meanings often comprise the idea of belonging, which has, for instance, been shown within the field of special education (Koster, Nakken, Pijl, and van Houten, 2009). The traditions described above relate to the two traditional ways to understand how disabilities arise: 'the individual model' and 'the social model' (Vehmas, Kristiansen, and Shakespeare, 2009). It can be argued that social work and social pedagogy have primarily been influenced by the latter and more social concept of participation.

The field of research

Since the beginning of the 2000s, numerous Swedish doctoral theses have been related to – or in several cases conducted in-depth and nuanced analyses using – the concept of participation. These theses are studies of people whose common denominator is their intellectual disability (ID), but they are studied in different contexts: schools offering special needs programmes (e.g. Molin, 2004; Mineur, 2013), the transition to working life (Arvidsson, 2016), housing, daily activities and leisure time (Blomberg, 2006), homes for the elderly, community-based living environments (Kåhlin, 2015), and church activities (Vikdahl, 2014). Another aspect that combines these dissertations is that they are primarily based on empirical material gathered from institutional contexts like ‘a school offering a special needs programme’ or ‘disability services’. The cutting edge of research now offers a more nuanced analysis of the different meanings of participation in the (formal) everyday lives of people with ID. However, we still know rather little about the non-formal or informal dimensions of participation. For instance, in what way can various (informal) social arenas in the civil society provide alternative belongings?

Internationally, research with a special focus on participation and social pedagogy has been concerned with topics like professional-child relationships (Cameron, 2013) and methods for enhancing everyday life decision-making for young people with learning disabilities (Carter, Cameron, Walton, and Houghton, 2013). Nevertheless, in systematic meta-evaluations of (103) instruments intended to measure participation, it was found that items (within participation domains of work/study, social life, general participation, home, leisure, transport, and shopping) mainly assess participation problems and accomplishments. One conclusion was that the instruments only to a limited extent measured participation and rather few items concerned satisfaction with participation (Eyssen et al., 2011). The authors claim that some key elements in definitions of participation could be identified, namely; the importance of the context or environment, the meaning of community, client-centeredness, determinants other than health condition and interdependence and social networks rather than independence’ (p 984). Analogous to these results, others have criticized current participation measurements as having a one-sided focus on capacity related to activity, often based on normative standards of frequency and duration, and on the assumption that ‘more is always better’ (Piškur et al., 2014).

The authors stress that definitions and measurements of participation that do not include subjective experiences or satisfaction are problematic: ‘Is it possible to talk about a child’s participation at school without including the child’s subjective meaning about the “lived experience?”’ (p. 215). Another systematic review on participation research in the field of disability (Hedvall, 2017) calls for more studies covering a ‘process perspective’ on participation over time, in contrast to participation as ‘a condition’. There seems to be a need for approaches with increased focus on people's subjective sense of belonging, their social roles, and experiences of social involvement. This paper draws attention to a broader definition of participation, and that problematises different meanings and aspects of participation and belonging. This is certainly not new to the field of social pedagogy, in which participation analyses have previously made use of terminology associated with social inclusion, social integration and belonging (Rothuizen and Harbo, 2017).

Consequently, this conceptual paper aims to identify and discuss understandings of participation and belonging with relevance for social work and social pedagogy and, as a prolongation, propose some specific characteristics of a social pedagogical participation concept. Research was conducted with the following question in mind: What characterizes the belonging dimension of participation and how can this be understood and constructed in different social contexts?

Methods

The empirical data collection – used for illustrations in the Findings section – was gathered from three different research projects. The first project is from my PhD thesis on work participation in the special needs programme for students with ID at an upper secondary school (Molin, 2004). The second project is my postdoc on the transition from school to working life for young people and young adults with ID (Molin, 2008). The third project concerns Internet and social media use and online identities among young people with ID (Molin, Sorbring, and Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2017). Since this is primarily a theoretical article, it’s important to underline that empirical data is used for the purpose of illustrating theoretical understandings. However, in the following section I will account for the way data was gathered in the three projects.

In Sweden, both of the upper secondary school special needs programmes for students with ID are four-year, non-obligatory programmes that students can attend once they have completed nine-years of compulsory education. The two programmes are the individual programme, which is primarily designed for students with a severe or moderate ID, and, the national programme, mainly designed for students with a mild ID. In the context of Swedish school legislation, an intellectual disability (*utvecklingsstörning*), along with an assessment that confirms the inability to attain the regular knowledge goals is considered a requirement for being enrolled in one of the special needs programmes for students with ID (*särskola*). In this article I refer to ID in terms of the AAIDD put forward by Schalock, et al. (2010, p. 1): ‘Intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour as expressed in conceptual, social and practical adaptive skills. This disability originates before age 18’.

Participants

Data for the first two projects was gathered using ethnographic methods, mainly participant observation (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002) in everyday school and working contexts, supplemented by qualitative and semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1997) with young people and young adults with ID (16-28 years), school staff, employment agency personnel and managers for daily activities. The participant observation was conducted over a period of one year in upper secondary special needs programme settings and in daily activities (see Molin, 2004; Molin, 2008). In the third project data was gathered through qualitative and semi-structured interviews with 27 young people with ID (age 16-20 years) (Molin, Sorbring, and Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2017). Generally, there has been an even distribution between (young) men and women in the projects, and encompassing predominantly young people with a mild (but to some extent also moderate) ID.

Analysis

In the first two projects, the participant observations were registered in fieldnotes and for the analysis of the material an interpretive approach was used, according to a hermeneutic tradition (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). In the third project a thematic content analysis was adopted (Braun

and Clarke, 2006). All interviews have been recorded and transcribed verbatim. The material was thereafter read through several times and then systematically coded in relation to the research aim and objectives. The codes were then organized into different empirically derived themes. In the next step these themes were redefined using a dialectic process, in accordance with the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. In this article, however, the analysis has been inspired by Willis and Trondman's (2002) TIME-model—'Theoretically Informed Methodology for Ethnography'—where the strategy is to dialectically integrate both theory-driven and empirically driven reasoning to interpret and understand a given phenomenon.

Ethical considerations

Conducting research on young people with ID always requires different types of ethical considerations in different parts of the research process. Approval from The Ethics Board of West Sweden has been obtained (Dnr 048-15), and the project has been adapted to comply with the Swedish code of ethics concerning requirements for information, consent, usage of data, and confidentiality.

Findings – Three cases on participation and belonging

The following will explore and crystallize what the aspect of belonging, in terms of participation, can mean in three different cases (derived from the three projects described in the previous section), and then offer a theoretical discussion of the relationship between participation, belonging, and social pedagogy. The three cases relate to participation and the sense of belonging felt by young people with ID in three different contexts: (1) a school with a special needs programme, (2) transition from school to working life, as well as (3) Internet and social media use. Each case section starts with a brief introductory description of the specific setting and other contextual circumstances. Thereafter, empirical illustrations of the aspects of belonging in terms of participation will be highlighted. In the next step, a conceptualization of the illustrations is presented. Finally, in the discussion section, the three cases are discussed in relation to common theoretical ways of understanding belonging and social pedagogy.

Case 1 – School with a special needs programme

The first case is based on a doctoral thesis conducted in an upper secondary special needs programme setting (Molin, 2004). The overall purpose of this dissertation was to build up a broad base of knowledge regarding a scientific concept of participation. This was done by elucidating and questioning various forms of participation. The dissertation involved both a ‘conceptual analysis’, where I inquired the scope and content of the concept of participation, and a one-year ethnographic field study, where within a municipal organisational framework I investigated participation from the perspectives of young people attending upper secondary school programmes for students with ID. The concept analysis resulted in a number of forms of participation, for example: ‘activity’, ‘involvement’, ‘autonomy’, ‘influence’, ‘power’ and ‘belonging’. These forms (or components) of participation were later in the forthcoming field study reflected in different settings within the school and during interaction with peers outside the special needs programme.

Especially the concept of belonging seems to have specific meanings for the young people with ID in everyday school situations. This was particularly prominent in a group of students with mild ID, and who to some extent could be considered to be on the borderline between belonging to or not belonging to the special needs program. On the one hand these students, like every one of the students enrolled in the setting, had a ‘formal belonging’ to the special needs programme for students with ID. On the other hand, this group of students – as in the ethnographic study – was characterized as ‘the tough gang’ – also giving expression to the negotiation between their ‘informal belonging’ to arenas and communities (e.g. sports, theatre, and music concert activities) that did not associate them with the formal, low-valued and stigmatized affiliation to the special needs programme.

[...] I continued to ask if there is anything that happens at the school that they would like to participate in. Elvira (student) replied rapidly:

‘Yes, hazing activities (*nollning*)! Anyone who starts upper secondary school can be part of it, except us who are enrolled in the special needs programme...’

Jerry (student): ‘Yes, hazing activities seem awesome’.

Researcher: ‘But, Elvira, you talked earlier about bullying. Some say that hazing activities could involve bullying tendencies. What do you say about that?’

Elvira: 'Yes, but you will be involved and a part of it all anyway'. (Field note from group conversation)

The formal belonging includes a 'vertical dimension' in the sense of teacher-pupil, staff-user, etc. – alternatively that someone decides on admission to, for example, a special needs class or activity. The informal belonging has a 'horizontal dimension' in the sense that it often relates to the possibility of being accepted among peers. The teachers' reflections regarding this group of students were the following:

We have never had such students here before. It is thus a completely new type of students ... and I would think that there will be more such students. Special needs students are usually well-behaved students in the sense that they are very polite and unobtrusive and do not make mischief – they are obedient (Teacher Interview 1).

The students' informal sense of belonging seemed to concern their experiences of social cohesion and the sense of being accepted in a broader context. This negotiation was partly expressed in a changing, rebellious, non-compassionate attitude, on the basis of which several of the young people in different ways showed that they did not feel settled into the safe, well-appointed, and to some extent segregated special needs programme context. They wanted to be – not just 'like' the others – but also 'with' the others.

Somewhat simplified, it can be said that a result of this thesis study was that the concept of belonging has different kinds of meanings for young people enrolled in upper secondary special needs programmes for students with ID. For example, the formal belonging to the special needs programme seemed to pose a threat to the self-image that a certain group of students tried to maintain. This appeared to be largely based on the duality in belonging to two different worlds, since this group of students had their informal belonging (i.e. their collective identification) with non-disabled students enrolled in regular upper secondary programmes.

Case 2 – Transition from school to working life

The second case is based on a (postdoctoral) follow-up study (Molin, 2008) of the doctoral thesis described above. One point of departure has to do with the structural changes within the Swedish welfare system in recent decades. Some researchers stress that the Scandinavian model

has traditionally been accounted for in terms of general social policy initiatives and social control (Esping-Andersen, 1999). Recent developments, however, mean that current welfare policy places a greater emphasis on an increased individualization, the individual's own responsibilities, and the freedom of choice (Bauman, 2001). One aim of the project was to discuss the ways in which this societal development exerts an influence on the self-image and sense of belonging among young adults with ID in their transition from an upper secondary school with a special needs program to working life. What characterizes these young people's strategies in negotiating paths from education to occupation?

The design of the study comprised four separate parts. In the first one, some of the students who participated in my thesis work were followed-up. Of special interest were those students who were described as 'the tough ones'. During their first year in the upper secondary special needs programme their conduct could be described as revolting, change-oriented, and non-compliant. But what could be said about their strategies when they, almost four years later, had left the special needs programme behind? What career opportunities were feasible for this particular group of students? Which experiences from the special needs programme did these students bring with them into future life? How does their sense of belonging, developed during their time on the special needs programme, affect their self-image?

In order to provide answers to these kinds of questions, three additional studies have been conducted. The first of these, entitled 'The daily care study' (Study No. 2) attempts to illuminate one so-called 'world of belonging'. In this study I have followed young people who have settled into the community care system. These people have been deemed eligible to receive statutory support in the form of daily care services. In 'The applicant study' (Study No. 3) three young men with a special needs programme background have been interviewed. These young men have chosen to make an effort to get 'a real job' in the open labour market. Additionally, all three have at least one more thing in common; they don't want to be associated with labels such as 'care', 'special needs', or 'deviance'. This is thus, in one way or another, also a 'world of belonging'. In the fourth study the role that formal support plays in the welfare system was investigated. Interviews have been carried out mainly with representatives from the Public Employment Service (*Arbetsförmedlingen*). In total, nearly 20 interviews have been conducted during the four separate studies, most of which have been supplemented with participant observations in different settings.

The analysis of the first ‘follow-up study’ (which the presentation is limited to here) found that currently ‘the tough ones’ have moderated their stance and become somewhat more compliant and accommodating. Or as ‘Elvira’ puts it: ‘I’m a special needs student – I have to cope with that’. One interesting analysis of the material concerned the students’ upper secondary school graduation. For example, one of the students – ‘Mats’ – had a rather unique way of discussing his own and his schoolmates’ future occupational possibilities. During graduation week Mats shouted out loud in the school corridor: ‘We don’t need no education – we’ll get a job anyhow!’ Later on – in an interview – Mats gave another hint about his future plans: ‘During the next year I will be in a European Union-financed project, with wage-subsidized employment. And after that I will enter the labour market – It doesn’t look bad for me...’

One interpretation of this has to do with what in the literature is termed ‘multidimensional identifications’ (Sicakkan and Lithman, 2005). In the mentioned excerpt there is a very noteworthy ‘WE’, and there is also a very interesting ‘I’. The example illustrates how Mats, in some cases, identifies with an ascribed identity [‘We are special needs students – we can expect a specially supported working life in the future...’]. In other cases, he identifies with another kind of more ordinary transition process ‘I am not like my peers – I will give it a try...’]. There is thus a notable notion between the ‘I’ and the ‘WE’. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman describes this duality in the following way:

‘Personal identity’ gives meaning to the ‘I’. ‘Social identity’ guarantees that meaning, and in addition allows one to speak of the ‘we’, in which the otherwise precarious and insecure ‘I’ may be lodged, rest safely and even wash out its own anxieties [...] ‘We’ must be powerful, or social identity won’t be gratifying (Bauman, 1999, xxxi).

The crucial question is: How powerful is Mats’ ‘WE’? The aspects of belonging to the transition process seem to be negotiated between ‘collective and individual identifications’.

Case 3 – Internet and social media use

The third and final case is based on a larger research project entitled ‘Particip@tion on the Internet? Students with intellectual disabilities and identification processes on the Internet’ (See e.g. Löfgren-Mårtenson, Molin, and Sorbring, 2018). Previous studies have shown that young

people with ID are concerned about being marginalized in the community of other young people, and that many are in fact lonelier than others. Since young people with ID often have different degrees of linguistic and communicative constraints, new social arenas (e.g. social networking sites) can be quite beneficial; on the other hand, using the Internet could also be problematic in different contexts. Research has highlighted a new generation of young people with ID who have developed alternative ways of relating to issues of participation and identity (Molin, 2008). It's about how they choose to present themselves, how they navigate online and offline, and the web-based forums they visit. By presenting themselves through descriptions of their own interests and personal characteristics instead of exposing the disability, so-called 'alternative identities' can be developed, where disability is not primarily in focus.

In an interview study conducted with 27 upper secondary school students with ID, several ways of expressing belonging and the quest for alternative identifications as well as emancipative strategies on the Internet and social media were found (Molin, Sorbring, and Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2017). It was predominantly those who were characterized as 'Gamers' or 'Vloggers' (or 'the outwardly directed') who used the Internet and social media to socialize and interact with other (non-disabled) peers outside their own special needs programme student group. But it was also within the outwardly directed group that there were more often experiences of getting hurt, being bullied, cheated, threatened, etc. online. On the one hand, Internet and social media provide opportunities to break free from experiences of stigmatized identities, but on the other hand, an increased Internet and social media use can also lead to young people with ID ending up in undesirable and risky situations:

I think I partly become someone else online [...] I think they have another picture of me on the Internet. (Peter)

I'm not afraid of adding people, but if they behave badly I block them. (Ninni)

To a lesser extent, it can be said that the Internet and social media have helped them to stimulate emancipative strategies for alternative identifications. In a few cases, where they could express and live out their preferred online identity, they have chosen to downsize their involvement on social media due to experiences of cyberbullying and/or unwanted exposure. The results of the study shed light on how the Internet and social media can contribute to both more and less participation for young people with ID. In the following section there is a theoretical and

conceptual discussion about how participation and belonging can contribute to the understanding of social pedagogy.

Discussion

One way to understand the complex identity construction processes that people with ID often face is to raise questions about what meaning belonging has in different contexts, but also to reflect upon what characterizes non-institutional arenas and their potential in relation to welfare state arenas. It is argued that the concept of participation – and especially dimensions of belonging related to the participation concept – can contribute to an alternative way to approach social pedagogy.

The concept of belonging has to a greater extent been noticed and used in research. Especially when it comes to research in fields like ethnicity, gender, sexuality and religion. However, the concept of belonging has not been used to any greater extent within disability research. One exception is Kannabiran, Vieten and Yuval-Davis (2006) who present an analytical framework in which we can understand the concept of belonging and the so-called ‘politics of belonging’. The concept of belonging can be described as a ‘thicker’ concept than that of citizenship.

Belonging is not just about membership, rights and duties, but also about the emotions that such memberships evoke. Nor can belonging be reduced to identities and identifications, which are about individual and collective narratives of self and other, presentation and labelling, myths of origin and myths of destiny. [...] Belonging is where the sociology of emotions interfaces with the sociology of power, where identification and participation collide or are at least aspired to or yearned for (189-190).

Bell (1999) has, with references to, among others, Judith Butler, discussed the concept of belonging as well as its content and extent. Bell’s point of departure is that people do not ‘belong’, in a natural way or in an ontological sense, to the world or any specific group within this world. Belonging is an achievement at ‘several levels of abstraction [...] the question of belonging necessarily incorporate[s] the issue of how common histories, experiences and places are created, imagined and sustained’ (Bell, 1999, p. 3). Lähdesmäki and colleagues (2016) define belonging in a similar way, when stating that the concept (in analogy with the concept

of participation) is often regarded as a merely positive concept. Belonging is something to be achieved and seldom comprises the possibilities of non-belonging or being excluded. The author claims that meaningful analysis of complex belonging processes needs to involve both belonging and non-belonging dimensions.

Thus, peoples' experiences of belonging in relation to different circumstances and communities can be considered socially constructed. Augmented, this statement means that peoples' way of adapting to different belongings is closely associated with theories concerning identification processes. Bell uses the concept of 'performative belonging' in order to investigate how peoples' performances can be a crucial part of identity construction. In the literature there has been an ongoing debate about the concept of identity and how this concept can be understood in relation to other contiguous concepts. The concept of identity has been criticised for being too static and essentialistic. Some authors would like to see more studies done on a more non-essentialist identity concept. One such example comes from Deaux and Ethier (1998) who assert that social identities concern those constructions of self that relate the person to a collective or category. This social identity work always exists within the scope of a continuous process of negotiation and re-negotiation. Aiming to understand the plurality of belongings, Bell makes an important distinction between the static and essentialist concept of 'identity' and the more dynamic and variable concept of 'identification'.

The element of 'being' is inherent in identity; and 'becoming' is what identification signifies. However, in addition to these, 'be-longing' also comprises the aspect of 'longing'. Longing signifies what we are not, what we are not becoming, but 'what we wish to become and be' (Bell in Sicakkan and Lithman, 2005, p 25).

Here the author shows three possible ways of using and understanding the concept of belonging. One way to understand belonging relates to something that someone is considered or regarded to be ('being'), e.g. through the categories and classifications that result from welfare state measures of help and support (c.f. Elvira: 'I am a former special needs pupil'). Another way of understanding the aspects of belonging is to analyse in what direction someone is heading ('becoming'). Here the continuously ongoing and changeable aspects of belonging processes are emphasized. Irrespective of what we are considered to be (e.g. how our surroundings have categorized us), we can always adapt in different ways to the fact that we are 'headed' in a certain direction or towards a certain belonging (c.f. Mats: 'We don't need no education – we'll get a job anyhow!'). People can choose to reconcile, rebel against, question, challenge, etc. an

ascribed belonging (see e.g. Rapley et al., 1998; Scott, 2015). Sometimes these processes are described as an incessant, active quest for social identity at work. A third way to approach belonging is to take notice of the ‘longing’ aspect of belonging. Into focus then comes people’s wishes, desires, dreams etc. (c.f. Mats: ‘And after that [wage-subsidized employment] I will enter the labour market – It doesn’t look bad for me...’). It can be stressed that this aspect of belonging has been overlooked in research. However, in the aspect of longing there are great opportunities regarding the task of understanding potential agency for young adults with ID, not least when it comes to how people develop and manage every day and sometimes contradictory belongings in the borderland between (formal) welfare state arenas and (non-formal and/or informal) civil society arenas (c.f. Hämäläinen, 2012).

Characteristics of a social pedagogical participation concept

One of the foundational pillars of social pedagogical knowledge and activity fields concerns the creation of the necessary acting spaces for participation and learning (Eriksson, Hermansson, and Münger, 2004). People’s social constructions, where the pedagogical role is to find out how this social meaning-making is done, thus come into focus (Molin, Gustavsson, and Hermansson, 2008). The illustrations above show how this meaning-making is often rooted in forms of alternative activity taking place in the borderland between working life and civil society (e.g. in leisure time, on the Internet and social media etc.). A social pedagogical analysis directs attention to the way people act in social situations – their participation and sense of belonging – in relation to given contextual prerequisites. Social pedagogy can offer such complementary perspectives, which put ‘competencies’ and ‘skills’ in a new and non-stigmatized context. This involves placing focus on contextual prerequisites and living conditions in order to reveal alternative arenas for alternative narratives.

The identity narratives can shift and change, be contested and multiply [...] [Authors have] construct[ed] identity as transition, always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong. This duality is often reflected in narratives of identity. As a rule, the emotional components of people’s constructions of themselves and their identities become more central the more threatened and less secure they feel (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 202).

There is a risk that social pedagogy reduces a dysfunctional relationship between the individual and society by narrowing conceptualization to a ‘defect in the individual’ or to a ‘deviant behavior that should be repaired, corrected or healed by pedagogical means’ [...] [The main task of social pedagogy is] ‘to make people aware of their opportunities to take their destiny in their own hands and influence their own life conditions (Hämäläinen, 2012, p. 12). Thus, it can be said that a social pedagogical participation concept is characterized by:

- considering both people’s (individual) abilities in relation to (social) contextual conditions offered
- emphasizing the dimensions of belonging in people’s everyday life, and
- focusing on what people ‘do’ (the action dimension) to create meaning in their existence rather than what people ‘are’ in terms of attributed and essentialistic identities

A social pedagogical concept of participation shines a searchlight on that which can help with identifying and understanding the importance of liberating action spaces. Such spaces offer every member of society the opportunity to be part of a community and – in the best of worlds – this can unleash people's resources (c.f. IASW, 2014). The participation-promoting work would then be about managing pedagogical and dialogue-based situations that can develop competencies to use and create *scope for action* (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010). Such a stance would be analogous to Hämäläinen (2012) claiming that the history of social pedagogy ideas often focused on the individual as an agent – in opposition to a more fatalistic approach.

Finally, there are some limitations to the projects that need to be addressed. First, all of the projects have a limited number of informants, meaning that generalizations to a wider population cannot be made. Second, the studies are done in a Swedish context and generalisation to other countries can also be difficult. Third, the data material from the three projects is collected with different points of departure (diverse aims, research questions, settings, etc.) and over an extended period of time (nearly 15 years). This contributes to some difficulties in making comparisons between the projects.

Still, regardless of the limitations of the small-scale projects, the combination of both observations (illuminating peoples ‘actions’) and interviews (interpreting peoples ‘reflections upon actions’) in different everyday settings can provide essential insights on the basis of

different types of data. But, on the other hand, it is precisely this diversity of approaches to the concept of participation that constitutes its analytic potential and usability (c.f. Piškur et al., 2014). In their systematic review on the current status and use of the concept, Adair et al. (2018, p. 1114) conclude as follows:

In any clinical or research endeavour, it is important to be specific and clear about the underlying (research) question. The question serves as the basis for choosing (or at times creating) the appropriate measure(s) for the concepts under consideration [...] However, because participation is a ‘moving target’, measures need to be updated as our understanding changes.

Conclusion

Hence the question of what these processes of belonging can offer to the understanding of social pedagogy follows by necessity. Social pedagogy constitutes an important feature in several pedagogical processes that shape people’s learning in society, education, and working life. These processes are often set in arenas outside traditional and formal workplaces and educational institutions (c.f. Hämäläinen, 2012). Essentially, the social pedagogical perspective is based upon a multidisciplinary, socio-cultural and societal theory perspective. Here, people are not perceived primarily as clients of the welfare system, but as actors in a conflictual society. A social pedagogical perspective focuses on learning processes at different levels and in different situations (situated learning) and could be characterised as a middle-form of pedagogy and social work. In this regard, social pedagogy can contribute with complementary perspectives and understandings in relation to social work (c.f. Hämäläinen, 2003).

This duality of contradictory identification processes seems to concern negotiating the path between the acceptance of a secure and settled ‘care belonging’, and the possibility of breaking free from what is perceived to be a stigmatized and deviant identity – striving towards a (normal) life ‘like’ others and ‘with’ others. Above, it is shown how young people with intellectual disabilities – in different situations and contexts – use civil and non-institutional arenas in their multifaceted narratives about themselves, i.e. to “be someone” or to “belong to something” outside the (formal) institutional setting (e.g. the special school programme). Similarly, Eyssen et al. (2011) argues that the challenges of defining participation concerns to which extent research approaches and instruments can catch people’s performance of *social*

roles in different domains of social functioning. Consequently, activities are ‘distinguished from participation by stating that participation requires a social context, involving not just an environmental factor, but mainly involving other people’ (p 984). Hedvall (2017) also asks if it is even possible to stipulate definitions and instruments that are capable of capturing everything that has to do with participation. However, it is argued that there is great potential for continuing concept and theory development in the field (Bult et al., 2011).

An implication for professional social work practice (regarding, for instance, preventative school counsellors, student health teams or professionals in social care daily activity/housing services) is to pay attention to alternative identifications that are not based on notions of a stable and constant sense of belonging to a categorical group. Consequently, it’s concluded that the belonging dimension of social participation can be of particular importance for social pedagogy and social work.

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