

A modern building with a glass facade and a staircase in the foreground. The building has many windows and a central glass-enclosed area. People are walking on the ground floor and on the stairs. The text is overlaid on the image.

A service user perspectives on social pedagogical practise and professionalism

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Social pedagogy: Ethical Challenges in work with people in vulnerable positions in social pedagogical practice, research and education

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Research Question:
How can pedagogical professionalism get experienced and perceived by the people who are the subject of the professional work?



Interview questions

What do you think about pedagogues (If you think anything about them)

Can you give us an example of a good and a bad pedagogue?

What do you think is the most important that we have to teach our students so they can become good pedagogues?

Based on Data Material from the following:

- One focus group interview with 4 service users from a care home for homeless people and with addict problems
- One focus group interview with 4 service users from a second hand shop provided at municipal level as an activity center (the 4 persons come from 4 different residences)
- One individual interview with a former service user of a psychiatric activity and drop in center (this person works now as a peer-employee at a social psychiatric residence)

Methodological (ethical) reflexions

The interviews are based on a phenomenological search for the Being-in-the-world, that can be characterised as the fundamental challenge of phenomenology – to get as close as possible onto another persons life-world (Riceur 1994). And the participators are placed in very different life situations on the basis of their varied capacity and cognitively levels.

The interviews were based on a very open and very little structured interviewguide. An unmanageable group of participants who talk about what come up to their mind so we let them speak quite freely as a methodological point! However we strived to make them describe their experiences with respectively a good and a bad professional (to make the data more concrete and storytelling)– but it were extremely difficult to keep them to the question! Our role as interviewers becamethus more as making sure that all voices could be expressed and included in the dialogue!

Opposite experiences as a sign of huge variation in the subjective needs of the service users

At the Care Home

- What one person experience as a relevant and necessary concern can by another person be experiences as control, persecution and suspicion – as an example comes up different point of view on *Room Check* that one person see this as a transgression in the private sphere while another person regard it as a support to avoid drug abuse
- Disclosure of information among between the professionals is another example that one person regard as high professionalism and a sign of being aware of the problems and mental condition of the service users while another person experience this as a breach of trust when you have confided into a certain professional about private issues

Some other prominent trends: NPM as an external important factor

Most conspicuously from the **secondhand shop** (where four different residences are represented) Categorizing central systemic logic are dominating – no social concern in the replacement of people in the residences → challenging to integrate the different needs and lifestyles and an ongoing source to conflicts

Saving cuts and insecurity fill a lot in their descriptions – They feel they are left alone with challenged fellow residents in the weekends, no help for cleaning, bad food etc.

But a problem that really coincides is the comprehensive change in staff replacement and the frequent use of substitutes and students that they never get to know – as one of them expresses: *It feels sometimes like living in a railway station*
This constantly change in the staff seem to be a common problem that make it difficult to establish long-lasting relationships with the professionals

”Sometime the professionals forget that this is our home” About homeliness

The service users explain the feeling of getting “invaded” by students on internship – for instance international students, who speak English as they don’t understand (*they laugh at each other but we don’t know why*)

They experience to participate in residents meeting, but without having real influence on the decisions, since financial aspects, rules and framework overrules everything: *“the management decides everything anyway, they decide the color and the decoration on the wall”* (a 30-year old female resident and employed in the second hand shop).

The participation seem to be pseudo-involvement where the personal wishes and preferences of the service users are getting overshadowed by other regards and requirements. They experience not being taken seriously by the professionals why they don’t feel like competent people with autonomy!

When professionals are individualizing and producing guilt and shame

"And then you meet professional, who have been in the field for 20-30 years and they can say: Well don't you think it is just your imagination? Something you choose to think? Then they start to talk in therapeutic and biological terms without having the educational background. And they bring in their personal experiences from their own life as a truth criterion and use it as an answer book, but it's just from their own life and their own answer book you see? It is really dangerous because when I get told such things I think about them extremely muchso much that I cannot do anything about it you understand? So when someone tell me that my situation or disease is my own fault, then I begin to believe in it, even though I know it is not truth. But I don't know.....I try to make my life as good as possible and and I won't sit here and apologize for it, but I have tried several challenges when the professionals just make their own choices and assessments"

(25-year old male at the resident care home for homeless and addicted people)

When professionals treat people differently and it feels like they are hounding you

A 30-year old male resident from the care home for homeless and addicted people tell about a situation with a professional

"I had said some silly jokes and perhaps some stupid comments that this young person [a professional pedagogue] had some challenges to tackle. So she was really persecuting me for some time and I could feel that she adopted the role as a controlling policeman in her relation to me...accordingly I don't dare to make jokes with her anymore. I got a more thorough room check than the others and I got blamed for wrongdoings that she ignored with others. She actually went down on her knees to find a single lump of hash on my floor, that she wanted to send it to further investigation and What do I know. And when I talk to another (service user) about this episode and he exclaims Well but I had a mixed tray full of hash in it, when she was checking my room and she just ignored it. And I thought WHAT? Then you really feel chased. You feel that it is about a personal hetz, when all the others are getting ignored 10 times....."

A summary of negative experiences of the service users in their meeting with professional pedagogues

- Pedagogues who exceed their professionalism by being controlled of their own prejudices and value judgements about living a good life
- Pedagogues who have lost their sense of curiosity towards the service users and who are unable to comprehend what this attitude actually do to people who are in a more or less depending and powerless situation (It make the persons feel less worth, stimatized and apathetic)
- Pedagogues who act paternalistic – knowingly and disempowering → who make the person more helpless instead of competent

Bad professionals can be considered as professional who have misunderstood the purpose of socialpedagogy, that comprehend to make people able to make their own choices for the life they want to live → to strengthen human abilities – or capabilities as Marta Nussbaum defines it (Nussbaum 2011)

But several examples of professionals who act relevant and useful for the service users:

- Sometimes pedagogues exceed their professional obligations and do something "extra" something not expected, like a service user who tells a story about a professional who waited with her in 14 hours in the airport, when their plane was delayed ("and she didn't *have to*") and who later were sharing a taxi together – her story indicates what it means to feel treated as a fellow human being – when the professional does something **special** that makes the service user **feel special**
- Another one tell about her experiences with professionals who support her in self-regulation and by being at the cutting edge before she gets a relapse or go into a psychosis – (she seems grateful and impressed about their competences in such situations)
- When professionals seem to bother, show one interest and come and say: *Shall we do something together today?* (instead of *"locking themself into the office with their computers"*)
- Professionals who have special abilities, knowledge or competences – who can help one in tensed situations – for instance to get grants to a huge dentist bill that might overturn the budget!
- When professionals keep stricted to the rules to ensure safety for all the service users for instance when it is about drug and alcohol prohibition (so prohibitions can also be good!)
- When professionals show genuine interest, pay attention and have time for a talk!

Some general perceptions of how the service users describe the competent professional pedagogue as a person that....

- Show their authentic interest
- Have patience and takes good time
- Take you seriously and strives for helping with issues that *means something* for you (instead of neglect)
- Is able to make activities *with* you, to do something together (play games, music, have a cosy time, go for a walk, make food, arrange parties etc.)
- Do special and unexpected things, that make you *feel* special
- Can change their professional role and act spontaneously and authentic (can create proximity and associate relationship)
- Can act professional in a way, that you cannot feel it (more direct professional use of concepts and methods can create distance and objectification)
- Have sufficient professional self-confidence to deal with things you are bad at – and where the service user might be better and smarter – that might lead the asymmetric relation into a more equal balance

Requirements to professional social pedagogues

But what do these demands from the service users imply in a pedagogical professional perspective? Where do they place the professional and how can all these individual and composed requirements be complied with professional practise? What does it take for the single professional? And for the pedagogues as a profession?

One of the service users expresses the challenge by pedagogical professionalism like it is easier to express what the professional ought *not* to do than the opposite since: *"it is difficult to get a grip on what professional pedagogues do, when they do it right"*!

A central question to these requirements is to imagine the realistic perspective in a professionalism that might be based on a consistency and consolidation that can take peoples infinite variety of subjective wishes, needs, preferences and emotions into account?

What requires these experiences and perceptions of the service users from the professionals – regarding their awareness and competences?

This empirical data material reflects widespread differentiated experiences and perceptions from the service users. But decidedly the opposite perceptions occur too as the example with the room check shows – from being experienced as an abuse on one's integrity to be perceived as a support to self-regulation and avoid a relapse by being proactive. The service users from the same context; the care home for homeless and addicted people, shows here diametral opposite needs, which make great demands on the empathy and human flexibility of the professionals

But several similar features appears too. A recurring theme is the expressed need of a *personalized pedagogy* that makes it relevant and meaningful to the single service user. This requires that the professional shows authentic interest to the individual service user and can step out of the traditional professional role and can exceed the strict boundaries as required

The question is how these demands of "personal investment" diverger with the aim of reasonable working condition and work boundaries? And how can mutual rivalry between the professionals be avoided?

These experiences with professionals of the service users includes their opposed needs and diverse perceivements will be presented on future workshop about socialpedagogical professionalism with the pedagogues from the project. Further questions will be raised:

How can the professional pedagogue work in a personal relevant way and simultaneously work on a solidarity basis without boundless working conditions?

How do these demandings about professional empathy and personalized pedagogy relate to the societal requirements for evidence and goal-orientation??

When professionals manage to stay ahead

"When I moved in here, the professionals told me that I were not allowed to have incense sticks in my room. But I love when it smells good, so I have a kind of vanilla smell in here. But the professionals know I have had a cocaine abuse, that makes a gasoline smell, and they tell me that the incense sticks can overwhelm that smell. And that can give them a suspicion about me taken drugs. But I tell them that if they have any doubt at all, they are always welcome to take a look...I really want to be kept away from the drugs, so if I should get a relapse, they might manage to stop me before..." (a 27-year female resident at the care home for homeless and addicted people)