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EDUCATION INQUIRY

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Introducing assessment into Swedish leisure-time centres – pedagogues' attitudes and practices

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Abstract

This article analyses the findings of a survey exploring Swedish leisure-time pedagogues' experiences of assessment in school and leisure-time centres. It aims to boost knowledge of how assessment, as a prominent example of changed education governance, is entering the work of leisure-time pedagogues and how it is perceived by them. It is concluded that leisure-time pedagogues often assess the development of children's social competencies, activities in their centre and the leisure-time pedagogues' own contributions. Possible explanations of why these assessments are mainly based on informal observations without any documentation are discussed, as are the leisure-time pedagogues' ambiguous attitudes to them.

Key words: assessments, development talks, leisure-time centre, leisure-time pedagogue

Introduction

Individualisation is emphasised in the curricula of Swedish preschools, preschool-classes, compulsory schools and leisure-time centres and, in the late 1990s, individual development plans began to appear at the local level (Vallberg Roth & Månsson, 2008). The emerging culture of assessment and performance evaluation in school, including increasing demands for individualisation, also impacts both the work and identity of teachers (Ball, 2003).

Leisure-time pedagogues, namely teachers who mainly work in a leisure-time centre, running educational group activities for children outside school hours, have so far not been expected to produce written assessments of the children. They do, however, in close co-operation with parents, have had to consider how well the activities suit the needs of each child. In the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by the school, childcare staff started to hold discussions with colleagues, parents and children about progress (Wehner-Godée, 2005). To be able to give a picture of a child's situation and their comprehensive development whilst focussing on identity and sociality, the leisure-time pedagogues made observations before these discussions. Making observations based on psychological theories has a long tradition in preschool and has also influenced the work conducted in leisure-time centres (ibid). Such observations were previously

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made in order to develop the leisure-time centre, not to judge the individual child. According to the 1988 National Pedagogical Programme for Leisure-Time Centres, activities in leisure-time centres had to be developed on the basis of knowledge about children's development and how to support it (National Board of Health and Welfare 1988). At that time, any assessments were aimed at evaluating the leisure-time centres themselves. But what and how do the leisure-time pedagogues assess today when they work closely with a school, and what or whom do they address?

The aim of this article is to learn more about how assessment, as a prominent example of changed education governance, enters the work of leisure-time pedagogues and how it is perceived by professionals. Questions of how the pedagogues interpret and value "assessment" and the prevalence of assessment in their work are highlighted. Assessment has various meanings such as to value or inspect something, to estimate or evaluate, to give an opinion about something, or to mark someone or something (Vallberg Roth, 2009). An assessment focusing on younger children and their activities in preschools and leisure-time centres can involve an evaluation of structure, group and individuals but does not include marking (*ibid.*). In this article the term assessment is defined as a valuing opinion about activities, individuals and/or groups in a leisure-time centre and school. However, leisure-time pedagogues' eventual contribution to the marking of pupils in school is not included here.

The article emanates from a larger study about how external demands and internal expectations associated with assessments affect leisure-time pedagogues' work identity and performance.

Work in leisure-time centres and the introduction of assessments: a brief overview

In this section a background to the study is given, initially involving a brief overview of leisure-time centres. Further, two common areas for assessment connected to leisure-time pedagogues' work are presented: individual development plans in preschool and school and the assessment of quality work in school and leisure-time centres. As most research about childcare has addressed preschool children, several references are made to this field.

The Education Act stipulates that all municipalities must provide childcare for children from 6 to 12 years of age who attend a preschool class or compulsory education and whose parents work or study (The Education Act 1985/2001). Almost 80% of all school children aged 6 to 9 are enrolled in leisure-time centres, but the corresponding figure for 10 to 12 year olds is considerably lower (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2009).

Since the expansion of leisure-time centres began in the mid-1970s, leisure-time pedagogues have been working in teams that mainly support children's development and learning. This has often been achieved through optional, slightly challenging activities and play in groups. The individual child's performance was seldom in focus and rarely

a target for judgement. However, leisure-time pedagogues had to evaluate/assess how well each form of activity was suited to the purpose and task of the leisure-time centres which were to support children's development and complement the family's upbringing of children (National Board of Health and Welfare 1988). In 1995 a new paragraph in the Act on Social Service defined the main aims of school-age childcare to be a complement to school, to offer meaningful leisure-time and to contribute to children's development. This paragraph was later reproduced in the 1998 Education Act when all childcare was incorporated into the school system and the National Agency for Education became responsible for all childcare (Swedish National Agency of Education 2000). The above changes can be seen as a transformation from a child care discourse to a knowledge discourse (Haglund, 2009). At the same time, the national curriculum of compulsory education was modified to cover the work of preschool classes and leisure-time centres as well. The leisure-time centre should contribute to delivering the goals of the curricula, especially those concerning norms and values.

Today, leisure-time centres are often integrated with schools with regard to staff, premises and/or teaching. The political intention to merge schools and childcare began as a pedagogical aim and became a reality when, at the beginning of the 1990s, leisure-time centres started to be housed in school buildings. This was one result of the economic crisis of that time together with a considerable expansion of school-age childcare. The policymakers/authorities thought that this collaboration and use of leisure-time pedagogues' skills in schools would be good for all involved: the children, their parents and the staff. At this time, leisure-time pedagogues in many schools started to work in teams together with teachers on school-days. This co-operative approach was not, however, an easy process. Often the collaboration became a goal in its own right and the staff did not work to improve the situation of the children from a more holistic point of view (Flising 1995). For many years, there were many conflicts and the staff in the leisure-time centres found it especially difficult to express and make their tasks clear and concrete, as well as to create a distinct professional role within the school (Hansen 1999, Calander 1999, Andersson & Söderström 2002).

In Sweden, the training of leisure-time pedagogues has been arranged by universities and university colleges since 1977. Initially, the programme of Leisure-time Education lasted two years. Today, it lasts 3.5 years and forms part of the teacher training programme. The extension of the training and the movement from developmental psychology towards learning and pedagogy can be seen as an effort to build an alliance with the teachers in compulsory schools (a similar strategy was seen in the case of pre-school teachers, Nyberg, 2008). The union of leisure-time pedagogues promoted the integration between schools and leisure-time centres and the co-operation between the teachers and the leisure-time pedagogues in order to raise the status of the pedagogues. However, as mentioned above, during the first decades of co-operation the leisure-time pedagogues have not succeeded in their endeavour to create a distinct professional role.

Individual development plans

Since 2006 individual development plans (IDPs) have been mandatory in the Swedish compulsory school system. According to the general guidelines of the National Agency for Education, a school should inform pupils and their parents about the pupil's development with respect to knowledge/intellectual skills and social competence. In order to do this, the schools must involve all teachers who meet the child (Swedish National Agency for Education 2005). Knowledge about each pupil forms the basis of ongoing planning and provides an opportunity to analyse pedagogical work and its need for development. An important question relates to the role of leisure-time pedagogues in the assessment of the pupils' social and knowledge-based development since they meet all children both in the compulsory school and in the leisure-time centre. Are they seen as teachers in this situation and included in the work with IDPs (in the curriculum for the compulsory school and the leisure-time centres only teachers are talked about)?

Individual development plans are an important part of evaluation in the Swedish public sector (Elfström 2005, Vallberg Roth & Månsson 2005). In preschool, children's development and emotional life are assessed more than in compulsory school where, traditionally, only skills and performance in different school subjects are assessed. Psychological development theories have traditionally formed the basis on which staff in preschools made their assessments (Elfström 2005), which is comparable with the situation for staff in leisure-time centres. This modernistic view still exists but, simultaneously, it is possible to study individual development plans throughout life, "*as a part of a life-long/life-wide plan with the self as a reflexive project in confrontation with a great number of choices and continuous assessment of risks and opportunities*" (Vallberg Roth & Månsson, 2005, p. 7) This focus on the individual, which is also supported and pursued by the media, is a global phenomenon. Bartholdsson (in Vallberg Roth & Månsson 2005) studied discussions on progress between the teacher, parent and pupil and written contracts, which have become increasingly common. Most of the questions that parents and pupils were supposed to answer before the discussion were about the pupils' personal development and less about their knowledge of different school subjects (ibid.) According to Elfström (2005), IDPs in preschool are shaped by pedagogical practice, the context in which they are supposed to be used. They are therefore also built on conceptions and thoughts (both known and unknown), and the normal ways that preschool teachers act. The preschool teachers in Elfström's study argued that their work with IDPs had strengthened their own professional identities because their work became more visible. However, Elfström warns about the status which work with IDPs and observations can confer:

"...by the control exerted through these evaluation instruments, a large share of the freedom that management by objectives was supposed to ensure is withdrawn. Thus, it becomes a control over activities, and this control is about adapting to the things that these evaluation

instruments ask for. But it is also about the self-control that teachers/pedagogues expose themselves to. This is comparable to Foucault's concept of governmentality...." (Elfström 2005, p. 133, my translation).

Children are also subject to assessment and individual development plans during their spare time (Vallberg Roth, & Månsson 2005). Trainers, for example, in football clubs work with children's self-awareness and how to evaluate themselves, and they also make use of assessments. *"The children grow up perceiving their identity in a grid of documentation, measures and self evaluations"* (Vallberg Roth, & Månsson 2005, p. 10, my translation).

Quality and quality audits

Assessment not only addresses the child. Since the 1990s, quality assessment and quality audits have become crucial for the whole Swedish school system, including childcare. Teachers today are supposed to be autonomous professionals with responsibility for both teaching and promoting the development of pupils (Lundahl, 2005). They also have to participate in the development of the school. Beach (2005) concludes that these demands probably hold implications for the professional/occupational identity of all kinds of teachers and pedagogues.

The Swedish National Agency for Education has repeatedly reported that the level of quality is unacceptable and that the development of leisure-time centres is neglected in most municipalities (Swedish National Agency for Education 2000, 2006). Therefore, the Agency for Education introduced new general guidelines and comments pertaining to quality assessment in leisure-time centres, underlining the need for quality audits. Every municipal leisure-time centre must present a report assessing how effectively the centre has worked towards the goals of the Education Act and the values stated in the curriculum (Swedish National Agency for Education 2007a). Consequently, the National Agency for Education, in association with universities, has arranged in-service training in quality assessment and development work. During such training in northern Sweden in 2007, leisure-time pedagogues expressed a wish for improved working conditions. They suggested the need for smaller groups of children and better physical settings in order to strengthen the quality of provision. They also frequently expressed a wish to achieve a higher professional status with assistance from principals and local politicians. Curiously enough, the leisure-time pedagogues did not seem to consider their own experience to be important, nor did they regard themselves as agents of quality improvement. It is worthwhile highlighting how and to what extent the new obligations of quality reporting and assessment targeting the pupils influence leisure-time pedagogues' work and identity.

The empirical design

During the in-service training mentioned above a questionnaire was distributed to 279 people who work in leisure-time centres (leisure-time pedagogues, preschool class teachers and child minders). The questionnaire was tested on university teachers who are familiar with work in leisure-time centres. The final questionnaire was standardised using self-administered, closed-ended questions (Wilson & Sapsford 2006). The questions brought up the leisure-time pedagogues' attitudes to the word assessment, (defined as "a valuing opinion about something") as well as if, what and how they conduct assessments. Finally, it was asked where the assessment outcomes are discussed and what is their perceived value.

The questionnaires were distributed at the beginning of the conference and the participants were informed about the aim of the survey and ethical aspects such as the voluntariness of participation and confidentiality (The Swedish Research Council, 2009). The completed questionnaires were to be returned at the end of the day.

The responses rate, 73%, was quite high; this can be explained by what Ejlertson (1996) refers to as a "group-survey", i.e. questionnaires are delivered and collected on the same occasion. The participants filled in the questionnaire in breaks during the day which probably explains both external and internal drop-outs in terms of a reduced focus on the questionnaire. Of the 203 collected questionnaires 105 were filled in by leisure-time pedagogues.

The analysis is based on the answers given by the 105 leisure-time pedagogues, 72% of whom were females, while 28% were males. This roughly corresponds to the gender distribution seen among Swedish leisure-time pedagogues.

Results and trends

One-quarter of the leisure-time pedagogues (26 people) believed that the word assessment has a negative meaning, while less than a quarter (18 people) thought the opposite, namely that it has a positive connotation. More than half the respondents (61 people) were neutral. Men tended to have a more positive view; half of those who responded positively were men. When a definition of an oral and written assessment in terms of *valuing your opinion of something that takes place in leisure-time centres* was given, the numbers of positive answers increased to 42 people, while 16 respondents responded negatively, 43 respondents were neutral, while 4 did not reply. The tendency for men to be more positive was now less pronounced.

What to assess

The leisure-time pedagogues were asked to mark on a five-point scale from "not at all" to "very often" if they conduct assessments as part of their work in leisure-time centres. Ten factors were presented (Table 1) with an opportunity to add an additional one. In Table 1 the alternatives "not at all" and "rarely" were grouped together, as were "often" and "very often".

Table 1. Leisure-time pedagogues' assessments in leisure-time centres: factors assessed and the frequency of assessment (absolute numbers). N = 105.

Factors that are assessed:	Frequency of assessment			
	Not at all/ rarely	Neither rarely nor often	Often/ very often	No answer
activities	11	22	66	6
the harmony in the group of children	7	15	77	6
children's participation in the group	8	12	79	6
children's development of knowledge	34	33	31	7
children's development of social competence	5	11	84	5
meaningfulness of activities and play	8	24	68	5
contribution of colleagues	38	35	26	6
your own contribution	16	22	61	6
co-operation between school and LTC	21	33	46	5
physical environment	22	27	52	4
other (optional): "parents' involvement"	1	0	2	102

The majority of the respondents (84 people) reported that they assess the development of children's social competence often or very often. Almost as many assess children's group participation (79 people) and the harmony of the group (77 people). One-third (34 people) noted that they never or rarely assess the children's cognitive development, as compared to 5 of the respondents who noted that they never or rarely assess the children's development of social competence. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents answered that they assess activities and the meaningfulness of activities and play (66 and 68 respondents, respectively). Interestingly, they assess their own work to almost the same extent (61 people), but only one out of four (26 people) assess the contribution of their colleagues often or very often.

Forms of assessment

How do the leisure-time pedagogues conduct the assessments? The respondents were asked to what extent they make assessments by systematic observation/documentation and to what extent they make informal observations. They also were given an opportunity to provide other examples, which 14 respondents did. Those examples mainly concerned conversations between colleagues (Table 2).

Table 2. The frequency of systematic observation/documentation and informal observations (absolute numbers). N=105

Basis for assessment	Frequency of assessment			
	Not at all/ rarely	Neither rarely nor often	Often/ very often	No answer
Systematic observations/documentation	69	16	17	3
Informal observations	20	22	60	3

Less than one out of five of the respondents noted that they often, or very often, produce systematic observations/documentation and related assessments during their work in the leisure-time centre. On the other hand, more than half the respondents answered that they often, or very often, make assessments by informal observations. In another, more specific question, one out of ten noted that they produce “systematic documentation” often or very often, while eight out of ten noted that they make informal observations. Thus, if the question is narrowed down to address systematic documentation, which is probably more demanding than merely making systematic observations, very few leisure-time pedagogues respond positively.

There is no doubt that these leisure-time pedagogues do conduct assessments, mainly based on informal observations without any documentation. No differences were found between men and women in this respect.

The use of the assessments

The assessments conducted by the leisure-time pedagogues in the study are planned and used mostly within the team in the leisure-time centre. However, assessments are also used when teachers and leisure-time pedagogues jointly prepare for individual development talks with children and parents (Table 3).

Table 3. Assessments in different places and situations (absolute numbers). N=105

Places and situations	Frequency of assessment			
	Not at all/ rarely	Neither rarely nor often	Often / very often	Do not know / no answer
In teamwork in leisure-time centre	21	17	64	3
In teamwork in school	25	35	40	5
In preparation for pupil case conference	31	16	46	12
In preparation for individual development talks	19	20	60	6
In staff and leader conversations	30	23	43	9

From one perspective, it may be considered natural that the assessment is used most frequently in leisure-time pedagogue teams in the centre since the leisure-time activities should be in focus and occupy most of the working time of the pedagogues. Unfortunately, it is not possible from the answers to determine whether leisure-time centre activities actually are the focus of the assessment. One-fifth of the respondents reported that they undertook more of their work in preschool classes or schools, and four out of five spent a major part of their working time in the leisure-time centre.

One question concerned the utility of assessments for improving the situation for children, staff and/or the work in the centre. The respondents were asked to answer this using a five-point scale from “not at all” to “very good”. According to half the leisure-time pedagogues (52 people), the assessments were used to make improvements for the children. Less than one-third of the respondents (33 people) answered

that the assessments were used to make improvements for the staff, and more than one-third (39 people) claimed that the assessments were made in order to improve the work in the leisure-time centre more generally. A clear majority of the respondents (92 people) considered that the staff and the principal should make assessments aimed at improving the quality of work in the leisure-time centre. When asked who should make the assessments, the leisure-time pedagogues indicated the need for the participation of a range of staff members.

Almost all of the respondents, 96 out of 105, believed that they should use assessments when informing parents about the children's situation and development in the leisure-time centre, and that the leisure-time pedagogues themselves should make those assessments.

Development talks and individual development plans

Almost three-quarters of the respondents (72 people) maintained that *they are the ones who should carry out* the development talks with children and their parents, addressing the children's situation in the centre. Almost the same proportion (74 people) considered that *they should participate* in the work on individual development plans (IDPs) in school. Likewise, almost three-quarters (72 people) noted that they had participated, more or less, in work with children's IDPs – in preparation for and in follow ups to talks with a child and their parents (53 people); fewer respondents (30 people) had also participated in and influenced the talks.

Almost half the leisure-time pedagogues (50 people) considered that the staff of the leisure-time centre should definitely conduct assessments as a basis for the IDPs, while 23 answered yes with some hesitation. Less than half (47 people) advocated that preschool teachers and just a quarter (27 people) that child minders should undertake this task.

Knowledge and skills acquired during training

Only one-quarter of the respondents (26 people) said that they had attained adequate knowledge and skills during their training to prepare them for conducting assessments. Forty of them believed they had attained reasonable knowledge and skills, while 36 doubted that they had been prepared at all for working with assessments. Three respondents did not answer the question.

Discussion

The results of this survey indicate that Swedish leisure-time pedagogues do undertake assessments, even if their attitudes to doing them are not entirely positive. One possible explanation could be that the phenomenon is closely associated with final assessment in order to control and test pupils' knowledge, i.e. the type of assessments that were previously common in schools (c.f. Giota 2006). This is far from the sphere that leisure-time pedagogues are used to. The leisure-time centre has, by tradition,

served as a place of refuge which children could attend without having their knowledge or performance evaluated, assessed or marked. When the leisure-time pedagogues filled in the questionnaire it became obvious to them that they do actually conduct assessments, but that these are the type of assessments that are always used to interpret a situation. Such assessments are useful to them, but they do not consider conducting them systematically and in a written form. In the last decade, assessments have also been used in schools for purposes other than controlling students' knowledge, i.e. to develop a more supportive model, whereby co-operation with the student is important (Lindström & Lindberg 2005). Even international researchers advocate the development of formative assessment. Black and Wiliam (1998) argue that formative assessment is essential for raising standards of achievement and helping teachers and students to alter their performance. Giota (2006) concludes that there is no easy way and no answers about how to bring summative and formative assessments closer together.

Perhaps the leisure-time pedagogues' relatively negative attitude to assessment is an expression of their wish to support children, and not to harm them. When answering the questionnaire they realised that they do actually perform assessments, but probably more of the formative type. The factor most frequently assessed is children's social skills, and this may constitute a problem as it is hard to know if such assessments really serve a supportive and formative function for the child. For example, Giota (2006) found that differences between teachers' and students' assessments of students' motivation and competence seem to be greatest with respect to social skills; this indicates the complexity of this type of assessment.

It is also valuable to reflect on the results concerning where the assessments of the leisure-time pedagogues are used. Why did not more of the respondents use the assessments to inform their team at the leisure-time centre? Is it because of a lack of time together for pedagogical discussions? The questionnaire did not have any questions about working conditions. In other studies, however, and in evaluations made by the National Agency for Education it is clear that planning time together is limited and any time available is used to supplement teachers in school (Andersson & Söderström 2002, Swedish National Agency for Education 2000, 2006).

We may furthermore see a possible clash between the more traditional work ethos of leisure-time pedagogues and new professionalisation strategies. Are we on one hand witnessing an intrinsic resistance to working with assessments similar to that of schoolwork and a belief that they are not acceptable in a leisure-time centre? Do the leisure-time pedagogues fear that frequent assessment and documentation will risk the traditional role of the centre as a place of refuge where children are not supposed to be judged on the basis of their performance? Does the co-operation with teachers in school over pupils' IDPs constitute an ethical dilemma? On the other hand, does an alliance strategy (c.f. Selander 1989) demand that leisure-time pedagogues accept the culture of assessment prevalent in school? Finally, do the professionals take

risks by making their work more visible and the subject of evaluation by themselves, their colleagues and their superiors (c.f. Elfström 2005)? If this is the case, those in authority may be able to increase control over the professionals even if they govern through goals instead of rules and, in their rhetoric, do not consider how the goals will be reached. However, the professionals will become more accountable for quality. One reason may be a lack of awareness among professionals about the foundations upon which activities are built and how to achieve quality in leisure-time centres? Possibly there are also discrepancies between what constitutes “quality” in an optional activity where children are supposed to be offered support and meaningful leisure-time and “quality” in compulsory school activities. The findings of the survey indicate there are reasons to further study leisure-time pedagogues' experiences and the specific purposes and characteristics of their assessments. Vallberg Roth & Månsson (2008) suggest that a “transformative” assessment, with a more progressive approach, should be tried as a complement to the formative and summative forms. One question for further studies is whether such an assessment, “*more open to possible differences in development with respect to time, place, culture and pedagogical environment*” (ibid, p. 94, my translation) would better suit the work of leisure-time pedagogues. It is also important to analyse the fundamental views of children and the work underlying the assessments by leisure-time pedagogues and to determine whether these views have changed over time.

It is obvious from the survey that leisure-time pedagogues chiefly assess the individual child's development of social skills, the harmony and development of the group of children, the activities and the pedagogues' own contributions. Is it possible to assess the latter without also assessing colleagues, and what are the consequences of this? Leisure-time pedagogues mostly make assessments through informal observations but their focus, how they actually assess, and the consequences of the assessments cannot be determined from the present study. Nor it is possible to know why the respondents do or do not document their assessments. It is necessary to collect more in-depth qualitative data in order to answer such questions. Finally, it will be important to analyse what kinds of preparation the occupational training of leisure-time pedagogues involves, not only with respect to conducting different kinds of assessments in leisure-time centres and schools but also, no less importantly, to developing a critical approach to this form of what Powers (1999) refers to as “the audit society”.

Birgit Andersson is a doctoral student of Educational Work at the Department of Applied Educational Science, Umeå University. The primary focus of her research is how external demands and internal expectations associated with assessments affect leisure-time pedagogues' work identities and performances.

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