Negotiated pedagogical strategies between control efforts and pedagogical intentions of change

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Publication date: 2019

Citation for published version (APA):
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Hallo

Hi every one. This presentation contains empirical material from my PhD dissertation where I studied children's, adolescents’ and professionals’ everyday life at a secured institution in Denmark. This empirical material are gained through participatory fieldwork and qualitative interviews.

I investigated how the inherent contradiction between the professional caretakers’ efforts to maintain control over the youngsters while at the same time focusing pedagogical efforts on change and development, can have an effect on mutual conflicts and cooperation in the everyday dynamics of the institution.

Over the past many years, there has been a focus on evidence-based methods in the treatment of children and adolescents in social institutions.

Despite efforts that social workers should work according to common pedagogical strategies and methods, these efforts seems difficult to realize in the everyday lives together with the young.

In connection with Erik's presentation and the theoretically concerns, I want to show that everyday conflicts and cooperation are a complex matter, which means that social workers must negotiate and vary their participation in relation to the youngsters to make practice work – rather than working instrumentally after specific technics to provide specific development.

My ambition for this presentation is, to show the development through a conflict about a meal situation between 4 youngsters and 3 social workers – and open for a discussion about problems and concerns related to establish and control practice, youngsters development in predictable ways through common pedagogical technics.

Introduction

Social institutions are increasing being perceived as companies where social authorities can order specific services. These services can be understood as specific social pedagogical approaches by which directional development of the placed children, adolescents and adults can be controlled and regulated by the professionals. Some of them are ART, PAV. This directional development is perceived as a commodity that can be ordered by social authorities, produced, and documented by
professional social workers. In social institutions, the professionals therefore increasingly experience, that they must work on specific goals related to the children’s development ordered by the social authorities. In order to meet these demands, it’s often seen that the social institutions are increasingly trying to meet these requirements with so-called evidence-based methods in their relation to the children. The results of the pedagogical approaches and the developments that are being accelerated are increasingly being documented in IT-based documentation systems at the institutions by the social workers. In practice, however, there are difficulties in working with specific social pedagogical methods in relation to the placed children and adolescents to accelerate specific development. Here can social pedagogical methods be understood as certain techniques for regulating and managing a relationship and a practice. But as I shall show in this paper, based on a situation from my research in a secured institution, social practice is a complex practice that are difficult to manage in predictable ways. A practice with many different participants with very different interests, engagements and perspectives on what is going on. These diverse interests, commitments and perspectives on practice mean that it is difficult to align despite great efforts to do so.

The context

We are located in a context of a secure institution for youngsters under the age 18. These institutions are by authorities not described as prisons in official documents. In practice, however, they look like prisons and have many of the same physically characteristics. For example, tall walls with barbed wire on top. A large iron door that can only be opened from the inside through radio contact. Up to approx. 75% of the inmates are placed in custody, the rest are placed in pedagogical observation as they endanger themselves or others. Immigrants under the age of 18 without legal residence in Denmark are also located here. At secured institutions, everyday life, as in prisons, is strongly controlled and regulated by the professionals. In other words, the professionals try to control everyday routines and rhythms (what the inmates must do, when and how). However, even though everyday life takes place behind bars and high fences, there are still many conflicts and negotiations about how these routines and rhythms should proceed between the inmates and the professionals. During my fieldwork at the secured institution, I experienced a conflict about a meal situation between three social workers and 4 inmates in the age 15-17. In the development of this conflict, it becomes clear that the professionals cannot handle the conflict with the same pedagogical strategies towards the youngsters. The professionals must constantly vary and coordinate their participating engagements in relation to the development of the conflict to make
practice work. If we shall understand why professionals cannot act on common pedagogical strategies, I’ll argue, that we must investigate the influence of the historically contradiction between control efforts and pedagogical intentions of change that the professionals must deal with in their common practice.

In the case, we meet 4 young boys, aged 15 - 17, all of whom are placed in custody and await judgment in their case.

We are located in the kitchen-dining area

It is 6:45 pm and dinner is almost ready. The table is covered and everything is ready. The youngsters stay in their rooms as usual until the food is done. Suddenly, the social worker Ahmet discovers that there is a sprayed remoulade on the wall in the hallway, on the blackboard, on the floor, etc. It looks like an entire remoulade bottle is emptied all at once. The social workers gently start talking to each other about what to do with it. I also went out into the hallway several times and looked at it curiously. Ahmet, who has discovered it, tells colleagues that no food will be served until the youngsters have cleaned up. I can see that Kirsten and Christian are a little worried about the decision Ahmet has made on his own. And they do not comment on his claim. Ahmet walks down the hallway and knocks on the doors with a powerful hand as he loudly shouts that the meal is canceled until the remoulade is cleaned up.

In the above example, the situation is immediately perceived by Ahmet as a situation, that must be addressed with particularly restrictive controlled pedagogical initiatives. This pedagogical initiative on collective sanctions is shaped especially in control of the children (what they may do, when and how) and is received with great concerns by his colleagues. This may be due to the fact that the pedagogically initiative greatly interferes with the children's right to self- and codetermination over their access to food and the opportunity to quell their hunger and that collective sanctions are known to escalate conflicts between children and social workers.

The development in the conflict is further sharpened:

Ali begins to fill his plate

Ali enters the kitchen-dining room before Ahmet returns from the hallway. Ali sits down at the empty but fully covered dinner table and says loudly, "It wasn't me who did it". He starts to fill his plate. At first, Kirsten gently tries to stop him in a dialogue and stands next to Ali, who sits at the
table. Ali does not respond to her presence and, insistently, begins to fill his plate with food, despite Kirsten's presence beside him. Ahmet enters the kitchen-dining room and continuously takes Kirsten's place without dialogue between the two. He gets angry and marks with his body and verbally says, that Ali should not eat and grabs the plate of food on which they pull in from each side. Ali is obviously holding on to his plate even though Ahmet is trying to remove it. Ahmet gives up his initiative and tries to persuade him instead. Both Kirsten and Christian are clearly worried in the back of the kitchen. They just awaits Ahmets reactions.

In this example we see, that Ali will not accept Ahmet's collective sanction, including Ahmet´s interference in Ali´s right to self- and codetermination as to whether or not he wants to eat. In other words, a conflict arises about the pedagogically initiative which Ali finds unreasonable when he declares himself innocent. Ahmet tightens his control of Ali by physically facing him and pulling at the plate. Here we see a development in the pedagogical handling of Ali's right to self- and codetermination over the meal. First, an attempt at verbal handling of the control efforts of Ali and since this fails, Ahmet physically tries to maintain control over what Ali does and must not do. What started out as harmless remoulade on the wall now seems to have far-reaching consequences for the social workers and the young boys. This is because that the social workers are intervening with the youngsters with collective sanctions and that are perceived as unreasonable.

In the next, we must see that the other boys will also not accept the intervention of social workers in their right to self- and co-determination. Here, it ends up that in a way where the social workers must reorganize their pedagogical initiatives in ways that support children's access to the meal and create conditions for the children to take the initiative to clean up the remoulade.

"Swear by the Qur'an that I haven't done it."

Ismail is a new boy in the institution. He is also in the kitchen-dining room now and is starting to yell and stressing around in the room. The situation becomes even more chaotic. The mood is raw, and you can feel that it will escalate in a major conflict between the social workers and the young boys. Badru enters the room. He shouts, "Swear by the Qur'an that I haven't done it." There are three youngerst in the kitchen-dining room (Badru, Ali and Ismail), and all three social workers and myself. Atef is now the only one who remains in his own room. Ahmet is clearly angry and threatens the youngsters with that he will throw all the prepared meal into the trash if Ali doesn't stop eating. He reaches across the table and takes the salad bowl. Then he goes to the trash and throws all the freshly prepared salad into the black trash bin. Then he goes with quick steps and
grabs the dish with all the meat. The other social worker, Christian, stops him and stands in his way, and says, "You don't throw out the food." They both quarreling loudly next to the trash about how they should sanction the young boys. With the boys, Kirsten and me as spectators. Kirsten also says that no food is eaten before the remoulade, dried up and the wall is cleaned. But now she quietly backs out of her support to Ahmet and asks everyone to sit down at the table. Badru verbally attacks Kirsten and shouts, "Why do you change your mind every 5 minutes"? She doesn't answer and Badru doesn't get any explanation. Ahmet has now discovered that he doesn't get any support from his colleagues. Kirsten and Christian do not support his sanctions in throwing the food out. He puts the meat dish back on the table and sits down. We all now sit around the dining table (Kirsten, Christian, Ahmet, Badru, Ali, Ismail and myself. Atef is still missing) Atef remains in his own room. The boy Badru has meanwhile gone to the hallway and cleaned up.

After 5 minutes, Atef comes in and sits down at the table. Atef doesn’t want to eat. He says he's still not hungry for the pancakes we ate earlier in the day. Atef just sits there watching the other eats. He pushes the fork violently down in the table and makes big notches in it. You can see that the fork is completely skewed. After 5 min the boys says thank for the meal and go back to their rooms. The situation has been resolved but not clarified. Who really threw out the remoulade on the wall?

In the above example, we can see that the pedagogical handling of the remoulade on the wall has developed into a greater conflict between the youngest and the social workers. Such conflicts are not harmless as they can end in major physical conflicts between them.

When social workers deal with big control efforts of the youngers in secure institutions in sudden situations, there is rarely a long period of reflection. Here, as in the example above, social workers must respond quickly. Therefore, they rarely manage to coordinate their pedagogical strategies with each other before intervening in relation to the youngster. Therefore, it often happens that social workers have to reorganize their pedagogical strategies along the way as a result of developments in the conflict about how practice should proceed. In the example, it becomes clear that the two social workers do not agree with the pedagogical initiatives and that their control of young boys self-determination needs to be coordinated and reorganized in line with the young boys resistance. In conclusion, we see that when the social workers loosen up in their control efforts with the children's self- and co determination rights over the meal, conditions are created for the children to take the initiative to clean up the remoulade. Here it becomes possible to ask whether particularly stricter
and restrictive pedagogical initiatives make the youngsters initiatives to resolve conflicts more difficult and thus seem unintended for pedagogical intentions?