

## ***BOOK REVIEW***

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*Normaliseringsprincipen. (The Normalization Principle)*

Author: Nirje, Bengt.  
Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2003

One can hardly talk about the politics or ideology of disability without touching upon the Principle of Normalization. In the late 1960<sup>th</sup>, the ombudsman at FUB (the Swedish parental organisation for children with intellectual disabilities) Bengt Nirje, formulated this principle which from there on has had a heavy impact on the field of disability both in Sweden and elsewhere. The basic idea behind the Normalization Principle is that people with disabilities (from the beginning only people with intellectual disabilities) should have a right to living conditions and an everyday life which are as close as possible to normal ones. Nirje has since then for a quarter of a century in various articles and congress-addresses – all in English - presented and refined the principle. Among these presentations two handfults have earlier been published by the Centre for Disability Research at Uppsala University in Sweden (Nirje 1992 *The Normalization principle papers*). In the current work, *The Principle of Normalization* (Nirje 2003 *Normaliseringsprincipen*), some of these central articles (in more or less up-dated forms), accompanied by a few newly written articles, for the first time are collectively presented in Swedish for a broader Scandinavian audience.

The book starts with a general “background” chapter or a pre-text, which is Nirje’s decidedly most read and influential opus - *The Normalization Principle*. This article, published in Robert Kugel’s & Wolf Wolfensberger’s widely known anthology; *Changing patterns in residential services for the mentally retarded* (1969) (that in its first edition sold more than 20 000 copies, according to Nirje himself),

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exerted enormous influence on both the scientific and the general discourses at the time. In many respects the book became “the bible” for those who were rejecting the lack of development and rights for the inmates at the traditional institutions and therefore wanted to close them down.

After this overture Mårten Söder puts the Principle of Normalization into its historical context. Söder points out that it was Nirje, who in a time of segregation for people with disabilities gave the Principle of Normalization a clear definition. In the decades of expansion of the welfare-systems that preceded the publication of *Changing patterns*, people with disabilities in general and in particular those with learning difficulties, had been left behind in the diffusion of the growing welfare and they were for the most part considered to be deviants and passive objects of caretaking. In this context, doing what Nirje did, i.e. giving prominence to the citizen-perspective and arguing for the right to a life as close to normal as possible was something brand new which by then were neither beyond dispute nor in accordance with the convention.

In seven following and varying chapters Nirje then gives us the background, development and application of the Principle of Normalization. Through a personally stamped account he lets us follow the events and ways of arguing which formed the base of its development. The genesis of the Principle within the care-taking system for people with intellectual disabilities, the basic idea of equality in the welfare society and Nirje’s commitment within the “disability-movement” are all made very clear.

The eight facets of Normalization, i.e. the right to a normal rhythm of the day, week and year, a normal life-cycle, normal self-determination, normal sexual- and economic patterns and normal requirements on the environment are all described and exemplified. Especially innovating was the emphasis Nirje put on self-determination for people with intellectual disabilities, and a special chapter is devoted to this issue.

In the book, the author also deals with some of the misconceptions that have occurred and still do. Like for example that Normalization is a matter of making people normal. He also polarizes with another well-known advocate for Normalization, the earlier mentioned Wolf Wolfensberger and his widespread interpretation and further refinement of the Principle.

In the last chapter of the book, Mårten Söder discusses the importance of the Principle of Normalization for disability politics and for disability research. By focus-

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ing on the critique the Principle has been subjected to i.e. the lack of power- and gender-perspective, Nirje's non-problematic way of dealing with the encounters between professionals and disabled people, the total disregard of the disabled persons' own experiences, Söder points to the fact of the changed character of the Principle. What once was an expression for rebellion or even revolt against the establishment today has turned into the ideology of the establishment, authorities and into a governmental policy. Referring to the critical debate, Söder concludes that undoubtedly the Principle of Normalization has had a large impact on the debate and the shaping of the politics within the disability field and that it still can play an important role.

Through reading Bengt Nirje's *Normaliseringsprincipen*, anyone interested in disability politics in general and the Nordic one in particular gets valuable insight into the fundamental thoughts for a widely known ideological concept, and at the same time a version of what happened during one of the most momentous periods in the history of disability. If the inside- perspective in one way constitutes the strength of the book, from another point of view it also tends to become its weakness. *Normaliseringsprincipen* is at the same time a presentation of an important development within the field of disability policy and a summary of the life-work of one person. Through the occasional "namedropping" and extensive selv-biographical descriptions - sometimes mixed with thoughts of almost private-philosophical character - the book loses in interest for the readers primarily interested in the evolution of the idea. Reading through the book, it is getting increasingly evident that much time has elapsed since the introduction of the Principle, and that while the development has paved the way for that which was in the centre for heart-rending debates, today seems remarkably passé. Here Söders excellent framework is refreshing by putting Nirje's work into a wider context. Furthermore, from a pedagogical point of view it is of great value that not only the original article from *Changing Patterns* (1969) but also the often cited *Setting the Record straight* (published in 1985 together with Burt Perrin) now are available in Swedish.

No doubt it is often retrospectively easy to notice the shortcomings of the Principle. But it is also fair to say that very few other ideas have had such an impact as the Principle of Normalization within disability politics. This impact in conjunction with the willingness and ambition to approve the everyday lives of people with intellectual disabilities, has lived through Nirje's life-achievement and is expressed in various ways in this book. This is illustrated by the work being dedicated to the *People-first movement*, the Swedish association *Grunden* ("The base", which is run by people with intellectual disabilities themselves), and to Åke Johansson who for a number of years was the spokesman in Sweden for people with intellectual dis-

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abilities. But Nirje and his formulation of the Normalization principle will in the future not only be noticed by people with disabilities. It is and will be an important part in discussions on disability research and disability politics for many years to come.

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