

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

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*Specialpedagogik i högstadiet - Ett speciallärarperspektiv på verksamhet, verksamhetsförutsättningar och utvecklingsmöjligheter.*

*(Special education at the upper secondary level - A perspective by special education teachers on activities, activity conditions, and development possibilities)*

*Maria Ström*

*Doctoral Thesis, Åbo Akademi: Dept. of Special Education in Vasa, Finland, 1999.*

During the last decade there has been a, mostly academic, debate about alternative views of the meaning of special education. In a way, this could be looked upon as a paradigmatic shift. Internationally, advocates for this shift have been authors like T.M. Scrtic, D. Skidmore, and R. Bogdan during the last twenty years. However, "the paving of the road" started earlier in connection with the development of the stigmatisation concept by portal figures like Robert Edgerton and Ervin Goffman. In the Nordic countries authors like Ingemar Emanuelsson, Peder Haug, Anders Gustavsson, Bengt Persson, Gunnar Stangvik, Märten Söder, Johans Tveit Sandving and Jan Tøssebro are some of the profiles who have supported and developed this new standpoint, just to mention a few. As a whole, the shift means a change of opinion about the origin of causes for special education, or - in other words a shift of viewpoint about: Who is the carrier of the problem? In March this year, Kristina Ström of Åbo Academy in Vasa, Finland, defended her doctoral thesis in pedagogics which makes a good contribution to this central topic. Her dissertation deals with a general pedagogical problem, viz. how

to bring about a shift of main focus from a medical/psychological oriented view of students - where the student is most often looked upon as the carrier of eventual problems - to a sociological and organisational theory oriented point of view - where factors in the whole context around the student are considered. She does so in a macro as well as a micro perspective.

The study is based on results from an investigation about special education teachers' conceptions of their own professional activities. The author was once active as a special education teacher herself and she then experienced a lack of rules and regulations for the activities as problematic. Among other things, it was difficult to have meaningful cooperation with the subject teachers at the secondary level of the regular school. The author's hypothesis about the reasons for these difficulties was that of a subtle professional role.

Another incentive for the study was to try to find theoretical explanations for activity conditions, and development possibilities as to special education. The author tests her hypothesis as to the historical construction of special education and finds that the speedy extension of special education during the sixties through the seventies gave a framework for the form but left the content aside. A recent reason for the ambiguity of the status of special education could be found in the economic cuts that have hit schools during the nineties.

The official Finish goals of school integration linked to the prestigious ideals of normalisation, decentralisation and change of structure were met by hesitation by the teachers since they were considered to lead to incompatible tasks to carry through due to budget cuts. Thus, economy, instead of pedagogy, became the guideline for school activities. The author scrutinises the integrated special education and the qualitative change this activity went through as a consequence of intended reforms.

### **Method used**

The study had a longitudinal design, and the empirical part included special education teachers and some heads of schools in five school districts in Swedish spoken Finland.

As a whole, the method used for data collection was - beside a documentation review - theme, semi-structured interviews with seven special education teachers and the five heads, observation of the instructional process and group discussions, the latter in a sort of learning circle. Individual interviews were held with the teachers in the beginning and at the end of a three-year period. In between, eight group discussions were carried out. The introductory interviews made a base for the so-called actual-empirical analysis, while the group discussions

made the fundament for what the author calls intervention, i.e. for learning development purpose.

The purpose of the interviews, and of the discussions as well, was manifold. They should function as a sort of further education, where the professionalism of the teachers should be made explicit. Further, they should emphasise contradictions in search of the next developmental zone.

### **Results**

The author gives a historical background to special education in Finland and internationally through document studies. The purpose of this was to uncover driving forces and contradictions in the development of special education and how these have lead to a change of standpoints and praxis.

By scrutinising medical, psychological, sociological, and organisational theory models of explanation, the author comes to the conclusion that "learning difficulties are not value neutral". Instead, they are mostly social constructions. The definition of "special needs" varies depending on predominant viewpoints. A risk of using medical and psychological models and specialists for definition and measures is, that pedagogical aspects of the schooling process will be kept in the background. Sociological and organisation theory models of explanation will, on the other hand, make it possible to study special education in the context of society. This is exactly where tension between opinions arises, which may make a new development possible. An example is the tension field between segregation and integration.

Results from interviews with heads of school show that these are benevolent to special education as such, but they very often focused learning difficulties only. The author's interpretation of their answers points at their looking at special education measures as a guarantee for making the regular instruction free from disturbance. The viewpoints of the heads of school were mainly traditional, and as an example of this the author mentions their preference for clinics instead of integrated education.

As to results from the interviews with the special education teachers, the author focuses on four components:

- a/ the professional role
- b/ the direction of activities
- c/ professional knowledge
- d/ collaboration with subject teachers.

The following categories and aspects squares offer an overview of the results from the interviews and discussions that were crystallised as to the said

components. At the same time they give an insight into the author's metaphoric language.

The professional role

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Aspects</i>
The special ed. teacher as ...	
1. Teacher	The different teacher The clinic teacher The partnership teacher
2. The student nurse	The many-sided professional
3. The tutor	The insecure instructor
4. "The rope walker"	"The rope walker" & "the chameleon"
5. "The upbringer"	The parent & the fellow being
6. "The defence counsel"	"The ombudsman" & "the lobbyist"
7. The resource person	Everybody's teacher

The direction of activities

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Aspects</i>
1. The individual	The individual as object
2. The group/the class	The group/the class as object
3. The school	The school as object
4. The surroundings	The surrounding society as object

Professional knowledge

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Aspects</i>
1. How does the spec. ed. teacher give instruction?	Adaptation and individualisation Participation from "bottom and up"
2. The spec.ed. teacher as a basis of knowledge	Hunting for a theory

Collaboration with subject teachers.

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Aspects</i>
1. How do the spec. ed. teachers collaborate with the subject teachers?	The partnership teacher - a possibility a necessary evil? The students as field of collaboration? Who is responsible for the assessment
2. Collaboration conditions	Relations as prerequisites for collaboration Collaboration on condition of others The importance of the pedagogical leadership for collaboration

One of the strengths of the thesis is its anchorage in current and relevant theory. In addition, there are innovative aspects, since the author relates special education to organisation theory. Of certain interest is thereby that the author infringes the prevalent, western oriented theoretical approach by searching back to veterans from eastern Europe, like Vygotsky, Leontiev and Luria, whose theories are being linked to current western theories in a fruitful and interesting way.

The method used, developing work research (Swe. "utvecklande arbetsforskning"), is closely tied to the theoretical fundament and seems, together with the latter, as a logic entirety for the study. As a whole, it offers an instrument for the analysis of antagonism or contrasts in the prevalent activities in the shape of dilemmas, interruptions, disturbance and innovations (!). These contrasts may, if used in a constructive way, stepwise lead to historically possible, potentially new activities via "the next zone of development". Referring to Engeström the author concretises a model of analysis as a tool for interpretation of the results from the study in the shape of an activity system. This system is also called "the internal learning process" or "the expansive learning cycle". The motive force in this process is the antagonism between opinions amongst the teachers and the solution of these antagonistic opinions leads the process of development step by step (compare: the next zone of development).

Thereby I especially appreciate the attempt of interaction between the researcher and the participating special education teachers in order to reach the consciousness of the latter about their own intrinsic ability to develop knowledge in a "learning organisation".

Another strength is the systematic design of the study and its presentation, its cogency and consistency in combination with a good diction - attributes that ought to make the dissertation accessible for the general public.

Part of the latter standpoint are the compliant transitions between chapters and between sections, as well. Significant for this dissertation is its logical construction with a likewise break down into sections, like a modern web-site. This, combined with detailed references and footnotes, and well explained diagrams, makes it easy to follow the presentation.

In addition, the dissertation contains an impressive list of reference, which indicates that the author has exerted herself to "vacuum clean" the field. This extends the usefulness of the dissertation for those who want to explore further into the objects of the study.

The author uses interesting and expressive metaphors for the categorisation of the findings, e.g. the special education teacher as "the rope walker", "the chameleon", "the ombudsman", and "the lobbyist" (see the squares about The professional role, above). This makes it easier for the reader to understand and remember the results of the study in comparison with the use of more conventional category labels. At the same time these metaphors give a good insight into the dilemma of how to meet up with the demands put upon a modern special education teacher.

A final strength to mention is the convincing defence during the disputation act. The author "knows" her doctoral thesis and the problem dealt with, in dead. It was a pleasure to be the faculty opponent on the work of this very well organised author. Some methodological problems left aside, her contribution is of crucial importance for the understanding of the meaning of the new approach and alternative views on special education as mentioned in the ingress of this article.

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*They help us out – Normalisation work, self determination and people with learning disabilities.*

*Ove Mallander*

*Doctoral Thesis, School of Social Work, Lund University 1999.*

"*There ain't no normal life. There's just life. And you just have to live it!*"! The words belongs to the dying Doc Holiday, saying goodbye to his old friend Wyatt Earp, at the Glennwood Sanatorium in Colorado. It is with this scene from one of Georg Cosmatos' classic western movies that Ove Mallander opens his thesis about the normalisation endeavor and the possibilities for self determination in the care for persons with learning disabilities in Sweden. The scene not only introduces the main theme of the study, but also the visual manner of writing that characterises this interesting dissertation.

The film scene is described in detail, in a way that makes us feel the sense of atmosphere in the room and by the death-bed, which gives the dialogue its intensity and meaning. Also this sense of details and context is a characteristic feature of this strongly empirical analysis. Some will probably find it too detailed, almost intricate, and some sequences could probably have been left out without doing harm to the depth and stringency of the work. It might even have made the thesis more accessible to the general public. But with its intensity and visual descriptions, the thesis is never boring.

**Qualitative study**

The dissertation is about persons with learning difficulties, and about the possibilities for autonomy and self determination in their everyday life. Empirically, the study is based on qualitative fieldwork, partly in the form of participant observation carried out in a residential institution where the author was working at that time, and partly as follow up interviews with residents and staff members at six different group homes.

The aim of the study is to describe and analyse the different dwellings, and the care facilities connected to it, as normalisation practice, and while so doing, particularly look at the degree of self determination and personal space, which these care facilities allow for, and how the possibilities for such self determination are shaped. The different group homes are being systematically compared, and the group

homes are compared to the institution, to search for differences and similarities with significance for the questions raised.

Methodically this is a very thorough piece of work, but it also leaves open some questions which could have been elaborated a bit further. For instance, what impact does it have for the comparison between group homes and an institution, that the data from the institution are based on participant observation, while the data from the group homes stem from interviews. Data generated from respectively interviews and participant observation are of a rather different character, and are not always easy to compare directly. This is illustrated by the fact that the author, from the institution, can describe inconsistencies between what people say, and what he actually observes, while the investigation of group homes is dependent on what people say.

The thesis is well structured. After the opening scene, the author gives a broad description of the back cloth of the study; The Scandinavian Welfare State, the development of services for people with learning difficulties, and – more thoroughly – the development of the principle of normalisation. After that, the investigated dwellings are presented, in one chapter about the institution and one about the group homes, which also contain previous research in the area. The following five chapters contain a thorough and grounded analysis of various aspects of the institution and the group homes. The cases are here compared successively. The first two chapters analyse the internal relations (between residents, between residents and staff, and between staff members), and how everyday life and the activities it contains are structured in the different settings. The next three chapters are devoted to what is regarded as the main focus of the study; the possibilities for autonomy and self determination given for residents in the actual dwellings. This is analysed first in relation to what the author call *fundamental issues*, like the choice of residence, furnishing, the choice of companions, employment etc., and then to what is called the *everyday autonomy*, like leisure, spending, sexuality etc. Finally the question of autonomy and self determination is analysed in relation to everyday routines, such as dressing, hygiene, cleaning, laundry, and everything concerning food and meals.

This is a very thorough and grounded empirical analysis, which, without specific references, contains most of the steps in what Glaser & Strauss (1967) call "The Constant Comparative Method"; A multitude of features and incidents are compared, both within and between the different dwellings. Categories for the various aspects of the residents everyday life are developed and integrated in a way which allows for the generation of theoretical concepts. An example of such

concepts is the fruitful distinction between *reactive* and *proactive* influence. Throughout the whole analysis, findings are confronted with previous research and discussed with reference to alternative theory, explanations and conceptual frameworks. Questions and interpretations introduced early in the analysis are reintroduced at later stages and developed to greater clarity, which drives the analysis forward.

The only thing missing in this well conducted analysis is a concluding part which sums up the most important arguments, and where the multitude of interesting aspects and sub-analysis are integrated into a more comprehensive picture. It is therefore with some expectations we turn to the last chapter, called *Analysis and Interpretation*. And the chapter also starts by a summing up of the main conclusions, which, however, seems rather short to do justice to the richness of the preceding analysis. It's as if the data are being pressed to fit into categories defined in advance. It gives the impression that the author is preparing for a more general discussion where the nuances might be more disturbing than deepening. The ambition of this chapter is formulated to – no less than – explaining what it was in the construction of these dwellings that caused for the similarities and differences in solutions concerning how the work in the different dwellings was organised, and how this influenced the possibilities for autonomy and self determination given to residents.

### **The paradox of normalisation**

However, the most interesting part of this concluding chapter is the analysis of the regulating structures within each dwelling, and how they were divided within themselves. Here it is first and foremost the similarities between the dwellings that are objects of investigation. The author convincingly shows – what is also supported by previous research (which the author gives ample reference to) – that the possibilities of realising the ideas of normalisation, often are limited both by the way in which the services and supports connected to such facilities are organised and structured, and by dilemmas imbedded in the normalisation goals themselves. As far as the first is concerned, it is obvious that the cohabitation itself, with the spatial and sequential coordination that it requires, and the progressive character of paid work, tends to turn these dwellings into stratified sub-systems, where personal relations are based not so much on emotional bonds (like in the family), as on power, dependency and formally defined roles. At the same time there is taking place what the author calls an "internal differentiation" of the social structure of these dwellings, where different forms of practice, such as reproductive work, training and the communication of basic norms and values, which in a family

normally are strongly integrated, in the institution and the group homes take place as separate practices.

Nevertheless, it is the family – or rather the idea of the "good" or "normal" family – that represents the model for these dwellings. The idea is to create the "good" or "normal" home, by structuring the day and the activities taking place, as close as possible to the imagination of the normal. The attempt to realise the idea of the "normal" home, within a hierarchic and formally structured organisation based on paid work, produces, according to the author, a set *ambiguities*, which the staff are left to handle, both by creating "myths", and by the negotiation over classifications and interpretations of the residents as persons, and of their own work.

It is this same paradox which is reflected in the dialog between Doc Holiday and his friend Wyatt Earp. "Normal life" is not something you can create or teach, not even with professional help. It is by living it, that it becomes normal. But "*I don't know how*", Wyatt Earp replies. "*Sure You do*", says Doc Holiday, "*Just get on with it!*"

### **Institutional analyses**

The analysis culminates in what the author calls the theoretical essence of the study, where he makes use of new-institutional theory in the attempt to interpret what he regards as the most important findings concerning differences and similarities between the investigated dwellings. To explain the strong similarities in organisation and institutional design between the dwellings – also between group homes and institution, the author makes use of DiMaggio & Powell's (1983) theory of *isomorphism*, or processes which contribute to the standardisation of organisational design. DiMaggio & Powell distinguish between three types of isomorphism; *cogent* (by external pressure), *mimetic* (by imitation), and *normative isomorphism*. The latter is based on professional or other legitimate arguments. According to the author it is first and foremost the *mimetic isomorphism* that explains the similarities between the dwellings in question, which means that the dwellings have got their institutional design by imitating other (successful) organisations.

The problem with this explanation, however, is that it puts all the emphasis on the context, and that it only explains the similarities. To explain the differences the author turns to a more micro-oriented variant of new-institutional theory, represented by Zuker, who puts strong emphasis on the impact of cognitive (not ideological) processes on the design and transfer of institutional features, and on the importance of language and symbols. What makes Zuker particularly useful is,

according to the author, not only that she makes new-institutional theory relevant to analyses on a micro level, but also that the theory – different from a traditional agency-perspective – focuses on formally organised collectives.

According to Zuker, institutional features develop in formally organised collectives in three different ways; through the differentiation of roles, through internal infusion, and by the establishment of network, by linking together different elements which increases the "embeddedness" of the organisation. Mallander uses this scheme to analyse the differences between group homes, and between the group homes and the institution, regarding the degree of autonomy and self determination they allow for. Examples of role differentiation are not found. Considering links to other elements of the organisation, some few examples are given, but the main explanation, according to Mallander, is the process of internal infusion. This conclusion is based on the fact that those features – in some of the dwellings – which allowed for an increasing autonomy and self determination, all the time could be related to the same type of changes; a certain flexibility concerning routines and regulations, and an increase in individual adaptation.

It is reasonable to believe that positive experiences with increased flexibility in one area of the organisation, can lead to an increased flexibility also on other areas, and it is even reasonable to believe that this involves cognitive processes. But is it reasonable to see this type of change exclusively as result of internal processes? Couldn't these impulses have come from outside? And isn't it reasonable to believe that some people are more receptive to such impulses than others, which might cause for the variation between the group homes? There is something rigid and one-dimensional by this type of institutional analysis, especially in contrast to the rich and creative analysis earlier in this thesis. It represents a break both in style and in the line of argumentation. And it doesn't seem to contribute to the understanding of the autonomy and self determination of persons with learning difficulties living in group homes, or rather the lack of such. Another problem, which methodologically is of greater importance, is that the use of Zuker's theory of institutionalisation requires information about change over time, which the study of the group homes doesn't seem to contain. This means that the differences found between the group homes could have been there all from the start, or even diminished over time, rather than increased.

### **A valuable contribution**

After having read the interesting analysis of the organisation and inner life of these dwellings presented in the previous chapters of this thesis, I became somewhat surprised by the effort made to explain the differences that exist between the

dwelling. First of all the differences are small, and most likely affected by a number of different factors, among which individual properties of the residents and staff members might be an important one. Secondly, what's striking in these analyses are the strong similarities that exist in the organisation and performance of these entities, both between the different group homes, and between the group homes and the institution. And these similarities compose a picture of these places as quite rigid, hierarchic and staff dominated places of living, with strong limitations for individual flexibility and personal autonomy for the residents. The examples of individual choice and influence given to residents are *reactive*, most often initiated by the staff as part of a goal-oriented therapeutic practice. It is in the dense and empirically grounded analyses of how these practices are structured, through the interplay between organisation and individual agencies, between the way staff members understand and interpret the residents and their own work on the one hand, and practical and organisational limitations on the other, that the thesis first and foremost demonstrates its qualities. And in that respect it is a very valuable contribution, not only to social work and disability studies, but to social science in general.

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