
Special issue: *Social Pedagogy in the Nordic countries*

Article

Social pedagogy in a human rights context: Lessons from primary schools in Iceland

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How to Cite: Jóhannsdóttir, V., & Ingólfssdóttir, J. G. (2018). Social pedagogy in a human rights context: Lessons from primary schools in Iceland. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, 7(1): 3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2018.v7.1.003>.

Submission date: 18 June 2018; Acceptance date: 31 August 2018; Publication date: 28 September 2018

Peer review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Open access:

International Journal of Social Pedagogy is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Abstract

The profession of social pedagogues (SPs) in Iceland provides services for a diverse group of people, particularly disabled people of all ages within variety of community settings with inclusive and rights-based practices as their primary professional responsibility. Social pedagogues (SPs) in Iceland have been part of the primary school professional community since the 1974 law on compulsory education opened up the schools for disabled children. This article is based on the school part of an ongoing study which focuses on the role, status and professional developmental needs of SPs in Iceland within their diverse work settings in light of the rights-based demands made by the CRPD. The aim of the school part is to explore, describe and interpret the views and understandings of SPs about the social pedagogue as a contributing actor within inclusive primary schools in Iceland. The data is derived from two main sources; the participants provided texts from a half-open questionnaire and focus group interviews. The analysis is performed with the help of the expansive learning theory within the cultural-historical activity theory framework (CHAT). The findings indicate a large mismatch between

policy ideals, the SPs' professional human-rights based values and the reality SPs face within inclusive schools. Thus, we argue that it is important to acknowledge and utilise the SPs professional expertise embedded in the human rights approach and their innovative practices as part of transformative expansive learning culture and collective change effort in accordance with Article 24 in the CRPD.

Keywords: social pedagogy; human rights; CRPD; inclusive education; cultural-historical activity theory; expansive learning; professional collaboration

Introduction

The right to an inclusive education is articulated both in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (United Nations, 1989) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD) (United Nations, 2007). The purpose of the CRPD was not to elaborate new human rights standards but rather to increase compliance with existing ones, such as the CRC. The innovative character of the CRPD arises from its elaboration of existing human rights within the disability context. As a result, the CRPD was considered mainly as an implementation convention (de Beco, 2014, 2017).

The CRPD became the first legally binding international instrument to proclaim the right to inclusive education (United Nations, 2007). This right is outlined in Article 24, where it is stated that ‘persons with disabilities are entitled to receive the support required within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education’ which emphasizes both their academic and social development (United Nations, 2007). Article 24 in the CRPD also recognises the risk of disabled children being marginalised and isolated from their communities, therefore it caters for provision of services that actively enable disabled children to develop both on an individual level and within mainstream services (Callus and Farrugia, 2016). Additionally, Article 3 of the CRPD introduces inclusion as one of the general principles that must be implemented by the States Parties to the Convention.

Consistent with ratifying the CRC and the CRPD governments express their commitment to inclusive education that promotes the right of disabled children to be educated alongside their peers in mainstream classrooms (Armstrong and Barton, 2007; de Beco, 2016). Hence, inclusion is inexorably linked with the principles of equality and social justice in both educational and social domains (Liasidou, 2012). Armstrong and Barton articulate this thought in more detail when they write (2007, p. 6):

For us an inclusive education is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. It is about contributing to the realisation of an inclusive society with a demand for a rights approach as a central component of policy making. Thus, the question is fundamentally about issues of human rights, equity, social justice and the struggle for non-discriminatory society. These principles are at the heart of inclusive policy and practice.

The CRPD recasts disability as a social construction and brings a human rights dimension to disability issues which distances itself from the medical understanding (de Beco, 2014, 2016; Kanter et al., 2014). According to the medical understanding the focus is on the impairment or what is ‘wrong’ with the person and not what the person needs (Goodley, 2011). In the last decades, an ‘environmental turn’ in the understanding of disability has taken place resulting in the social-relational view which is at the core of the CRPD (United Nations, 2007). There, disability is seen as a phenomenon emerging out of interactivity between impairment and disabling modes of socio-economic organizations which aim more clearly at the equality of results and the eradication of practices and policies that increase or maintain disadvantage (Arnardóttir, 2007). This is in line with Jónsson (2016) who has pointed out that educational practices premised on the individual medical understanding take the form of special education rather than inclusive education, revolving around diagnosis and fixing whatever is found to be out of order.

The term ‘inclusive education’ was introduced into legal texts in Iceland in 2008 and has since then been a statutory policy in the Icelandic primary schools (Lög um grunnskóla, nr. 91/2008). Social pedagogues (SPs) in Iceland have been part of the primary school professional community since the 1974 law on compulsory education opened up access to mainstream schools for disabled children (Lög um grunnskóla, nr. 63/1974). The Salamanca statement, which states that ordinary schools should be for all children (UNESCO, 1994), led to an increasing demand for the services of SPs within mainstream schools. Research on the jurisdiction of SPs in Iceland revealed that 42% of practising SPs work within the school system (Björnsdóttir and Össurardóttir, 2015). This coincides with the study presented here where findings indicate that nearly 50% of practising SPs work with children and youth within schools and leisure where they are hired to support diverse groups of students, especially those with high support needs. However, there is a lack of research on how the SP’s professional expertise and role is acknowledged and valued within the schools. Furthermore, research on how their professional expertise is acknowledged and valued within the professional community of inclusive schools is still needed. It can be argued that further

knowledge on that matter is especially important now in light of the ever-increasing demand for the SPs' services within inclusive schools and their long history within the Icelandic school system.

This article is based on an ongoing study which focuses on the role, status and professional developmental needs of SPs in Iceland within their diverse work settings in light of the rights-based demands made by the CRPD. The part of the study presented here deals with SPs working at inclusive schools and aims to shed a light on the forces that shape their professional thinking, practices, and learning. To this end we utilize features of Engeström's (1987, 2001) cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to explore and interpret the SP's perspectives on what hinders and what supports successful inclusion. Also, to draw out the specialist expertise they bring with them into the inter-professional practices, such as the SP's interventions as a potential resource of expansive learning. The arguments we make are largely located within the explanatory frameworks of CHAT. The reasons for this are the same as described by Edwards (2005) when she says: 'CHAT does not restrict analyses of action to a focus solely on the individual. Action is seen as object oriented i.e. purposeful. Finally, CHAT has evolved from a focus on both individual mind and collective action and offers some scope for examining action in relation to intentions of others' (p. 170).

In this article we begin by briefly describing the context of the presented study in two sections; *Social pedagogues in Iceland* and *Inclusive education as a human right*. Then we introduce the theoretical background of cultural-historical activity theory and the applied methods followed by a summary of the main findings, which we then analyse and discuss in more detail with the help of Engeström's expansive learning cycle (Engeström, 2000).

Social pedagogues in Iceland

The profession of social pedagogues in Iceland, þroskaþjálfar (developmental therapists), is known internationally under the name of social educators or social pedagogues. The Icelandic professional association of SPs is a member of the International Association of Social Educators (AIEJI) and the Nordic Forum for Social Educators (NFFS) (Þroskaþjálfafélag Íslands, n.d. a). AIEJI, which is a network of social educators/pedagogues from around the world, has developed a set of shared competences under the name, *A Common Platform for Social Educators in Europe*, aiming at strengthening the co-operation of SPs across countries. There, SPs work is understood as a process of social actions of individuals in relation to individuals and various groups, such as disabled people and other marginalised groups, with the goal of full sociability and citizenship for all in accordance with human rights treaties (AIEJI, 2008, 2010). Furthermore, the Nordic Forum of Social Educators which is an association of Nordic professional unions that represent social educators/pedagogues, published a document titled *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Social Education* 'to ensure the child convention its legitimate role in social educational work' (p. 5) moreover to emphasize the SPs special responsibility of pointing out when children's rights are disregarded (Nordic Forum of Social Educators, 2011). It needs to be noted that the Icelandic professional association of SPs was an active participant in the preparation of the above-mentioned international documents that promote a democratic and human rights ground for guiding social pedagogical practices and the SPs professional development.

A study by Jóhannsdóttir and Lilliendahl (2015) which focuses on the profession of social pedagogues in Iceland in an international context shows that the role and working theory of Icelandic social pedagogues coincides with the professional competences developed by AIEJI (2008, 2010) in areas like ethics and ideological background, the CRC and the CRPD being the common denominator. The same authors draw out the importance of increased international awareness and networking which they claim could benefit the community of Icelandic social pedagogues by widening their perspective and strengthen their identity and sense of belonging to an international professional community. Their findings also indicate that increased participation of Icelandic social pedagogues could be of value to the international community of social pedagogues in Europe, particularly in the light of their experience in areas such as human rights-based services for disabled people of all ages in different sectors of society. Hämäläinen (2012, p. 5) talks about that 'country-specific traditions of social pedagogy can be understood, and must be studied, in the context of national histories'. Smith (2012) agrees to this notion when he highlights the different forms and terminology within social pedagogy in different countries even though they share common features.

In this light it is important to draw the attention to the origin of social pedagogy in Iceland which lies deep in disabled people's and disability scholars' battle for social justice and equality in all realms of life. This has influenced theory building and practices within the field of social pedagogy in Iceland as well as international theoretical discussions. The first social pedagogues in Iceland were educated in the fifth decade of the twentieth century as specialised nurses and caretakers within the largest institution for disabled people. Thus, the field of social pedagogy in Iceland is rooted in societal needs for trained practitioners and has evolved through several theoretical and ideological phases which were affected by changes in disability legislations and policies (Björnsdóttir and Össurardóttir, 2015; Jóhannsdóttir and Lilliendahl, 2015; Kristinsson, 2015).

Hämäläinen (2012) draws attention to the common way of defining social pedagogy through its occupational expressions and underlines that this kind of specification contents itself with administrative and organisational categories. The field of social pedagogy in Iceland has developed and is currently evolving in line with the afore-mentioned paradigm change from the medical understanding of disability, which has been the prevailing ideology, to the social-relational and human rights understanding rooted in the CRPD. Hence, the field contains a strong disability study perspective that deepens the understanding of human rights standards in service delivery, disability studies being an important pillar in the education and ethical guidelines of SPs in Iceland. This entails a shift in viewing disabled people as objects of protection or charity to regarding them as subjects of entitled rights to support and services necessary for social participation on an equal basis with others. The CRPD according to de Beco (2017) aims not only to preserve the dignity of disabled people by providing them with optimal prospects of autonomy, but also to abolish the various mechanisms that exclude disabled people from society. This calls for professional development of all stakeholders and learning in accordance with the human-rights standards and quality indicators embedded in the CRPD (Bergsveinsdóttir and Jóhannsdóttir, 2015). In this context Baldvinsdóttir (2012) argues that professions like SPs must reassess their practices in the light of the CRPD and abolish practices that do not conform to the treaty.

Social pedagogues (SPs) in Iceland today provide services for a diverse group of people, within variety of community settings with inclusive and rights-based practices as their primary professional responsibility (Háskóli Íslands, 2012; Landlæknisembættið, 2016; Þroskaþjálfafélag Íslands, n.d. b). The SPs professional education and expertise in Iceland today is rooted in the human rights approach manifested in the CRPD and the social-relational understanding of disability (Háskóli Íslands, 2012; Þroskaþjálfafélag Íslands, n.d. b). This is clearly reflected in their newly revised *Ethical protocol and ethical standards* (Landlæknisembættið, 2016) where it is highlighted that the SPs professional aim is to promote disabled people's full participation in an inclusive society. Furthermore, their aim is to safeguard and support disabled people's battle for social justice, equality and human rights in all realms of life in accordance with human rights treaties such as the CRC and the CRPD. The education of the SPs has been at the university level since 1998, now located within the Division of Education at the University of Iceland. It is a four-year program for professional qualifications and the fundamental pillars of study are: 'social education, disability studies, psychology and ethics'. The declared goal: 'is for students to acquire specialised knowledge and skills to provide disabled people a variety of services with the purpose of supporting their full participation in the community, equality and quality of life equal to others' (University of Iceland, 2017).

Recent Icelandic research which focuses on the challenges facing SPs and other professionals indicate professional and systemic tensions caused by the mismatch between the disabled people's entitled rights to quality services within mainstream settings, and the reality of segregated services and placements (Bergsveinsdóttir and Jóhannsdóttir, 2015; Jóhannsdóttir and Lilliendahl, 2015; Ingólfssdóttir et al., 2018; Reykjavíkurborg, 2006). This might be due to mismatching views on disability among different disciplines and the service providers despite the newly ratification of the CRPD in Iceland. This research also brings to the forefront the SPs' concern about their unclear status and role within mainstream services and the reality of working with a more diverse group of users and professionals which calls for increased collaboration and learning across professional and organisational boundaries (Bergsveinsdóttir and Jóhannsdóttir, 2015; Ingólfssdóttir et al., 2018; Jóhannsdóttir and Lilliendahl, 2015; Reykjavíkurborg, 2006).

Inclusive education as a human right

There is a general agreement on education being a fundamental human right and an important element in the development of children, communities, and countries. Accordingly, [de Beco \(2016\)](#) claims that the right to education is of the utmost importance for disabled people. Furthermore, he views education as a multiplier since it enables people to exercise other human rights such as economic, social and cultural rights and argues that education improves one's self-esteem and facilitates social mobility which is essential for every human being. [Kanter et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Ainscow \(2005\)](#) support this view when they argue that children with disabilities that have been to mainstream schools have greater chances to be full participants in society since inclusive thinking and practices help build more tolerant societies. This is in line with the assertion presented by [Giangreco et al. \(2012\)](#) when they highlight that belonging is a fundamental right and inclusion benefits everyone.

[de Beco \(2017\)](#) describes how the adoption of the CRPD has led to a rights-based approach to the issue of inclusive education and highlights that the question is no longer about why inclusive education is beneficial to disabled children, but how it can be achieved. Furthermore, he stresses that the right to inclusive education involves a systematic reform of the general education system so as to include disabled children in mainstream settings in the same way as their non-disabled peers. [Winzer and Mazure \(2000\)](#) express a similar notion when they describe the truly inclusive classroom as a community where diversity is valued and celebrated, and all children work, talk, cooperate and share.

It is highlighted in one of the sections of *the European Agency's Key Principles for Promoting Quality Education* ([EADSNE, 2009](#)) that 'support structures that impact upon inclusive education are diverse and often need to involve a range of different service professionals, approaches and working methods [...]' (p. 19). This is in line with the view of [Stoll and Louis \(2008\)](#) when they highlight the importance for an expanded approach to the concept of professional learning communities within inclusive schools in order to include both a broader membership and involving divergent knowledge bases.

The disempowering effects of segregated education such as isolation, stigma, low self-esteem, and restricted access to full range of educational opportunities are well documented ([Byrne, 2013](#)). Moreover, Byrne claims that: 'the move from segregation towards integration, and more recently inclusion, has not been without difficulty'. He states that 'the two terms, integration and inclusion have been, and continue to be used interchangeably without due recognition of their distinctiveness' (p. 234). He reminds us, however, by citing [Riddell \(2007\)](#) that even though the numbers of disabled children attending mainstream schools have been increasing this does not mean that the disabled child has full access to the curriculum or is fully included in all aspects of school life.

This argument is clearly reflected in the evaluation of the implementation of inclusive education policy in Iceland which was conducted between 2013 and 2015 ([Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2015](#)). The key findings show that there was a general agreement among stakeholders on the national inclusive education policy. Many stakeholders, however, expressed a need for improved professional learning, increased support for schools and a need for further research to enable effective implementation. This complies with the new external audit of the European agency on inclusive schooling in Iceland which indicates a lack of consensus between understandings among stakeholders on the meaning of inclusive education in practice. Moreover, the stakeholders highlight the gap between inclusive education ideology and actual practice ([EASNIE, 2017](#)). Thus, one can argue that the complex challenges facing inclusive education in Iceland call for increased diversity in expertise and knowledge as well as increased collaboration across professional boundaries.

Cultural-historical activity theory as a theoretical lens and analytical framework

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) is a conceptual framework for analysing complex and evolving professional practices. [Engeström \(1987\)](#) describes how CHAT helps to understand and analyse human activities in their social contexts ([Engeström, 1987, 2001, 2016](#)). Moreover, he sees instability, internal tensions and contradictions within the systems as the drivers of change and learning in professional and organisational practice. CHAT offers a new perspective in analysing organisational and professional learning and cognition within complex systems, which are called 'activity systems' and described in a

triangular diagram as is explained in Figure 1.

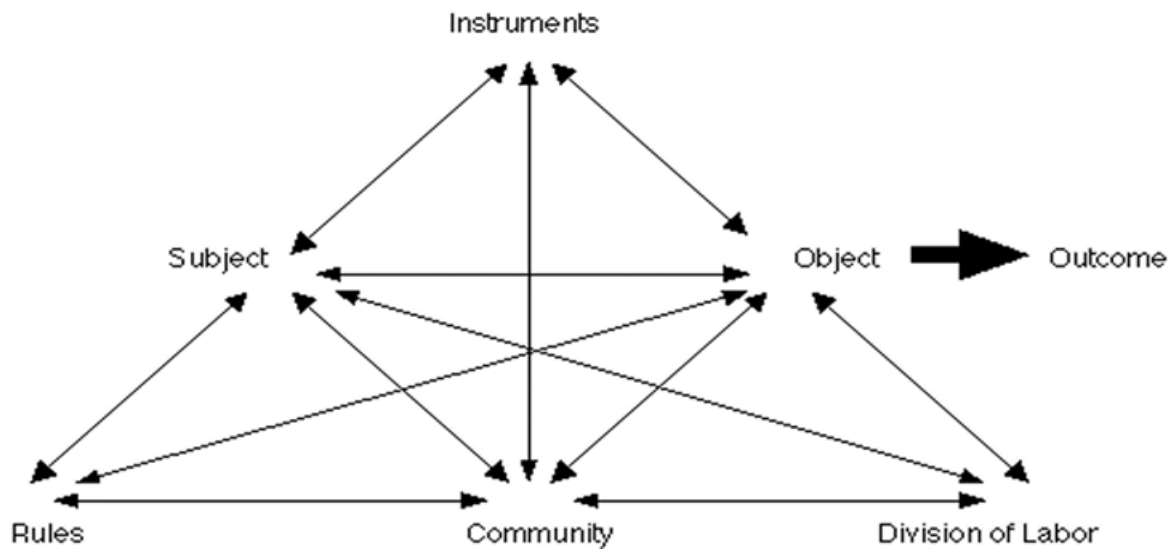


Figure 1 The mediational structure of an activity system (Engeström, 1987, p. 78).

The *subject* refers to the individual or a group of individuals whose agency is chosen as the point of view in the analysis. The *object* refers to the ends or the goal towards which the activity is directed. The subjects act on the object by *instruments*, giving the activity a specific direction. The mediation occurs through the use of many different types of instruments, material instruments as well as mental, including culture, role positions, ways of thinking and language. The instruments mediate relationships between the subject and the object. The *rules* refer to the set of norms and conventions that regulate the activity, the *community* consists of the people involved in the activity who share the same object, and the *division of labour* mediates the hierarchy of labour and division of tasks between its members.

In this context, the SPs can be seen as the subject of the activity which is the inclusive school and its declared goal as the object. To be able to analyse complex interactions and relationships, a theoretical account of the constructive elements of the system under investigation is needed. Engeström (2001) emphasises that CHAT is not a predictive theory but a conceptual framework within which different theoretical perspectives may be employed. In case of our study we take the influence of the paradigm shift from the medical view to the rights based social-relational understanding of disability as a theoretical standpoint when analysing the lived experiences of SPs within inclusive schools which is the primary unit of analysis in our study.

The school operates as an activity system (see Figure 1) in network relations with other activity systems, such as the children's families and a variety of school-based services, all with a common object grounded in the aim of inclusive schooling. When an activity system adopts a new element from the outside, such as the legislation on inclusive schooling (Lög um grunnskóla, nr. 91/2008) which requires fundamental change in theoretical understandings and practices, it often leads to aggravated contradictions where some old elements, such as rules or division of labour collide with the new ones. Such contradictions generate disturbances and conflicts but can also bring about innovative attempts to change the activity.

Engeström (2001) summarises and explains the function of activity systems according to five principles: *Firstly*, he sees the primary unit of analysis as a collective, artefact-mediated and object-oriented activity system. *Secondly*, he describes multi-voicedness in activity systems and builds on the assumption that an activity system is always a community with several viewpoints, traditions and interests. The *third* principle is historicity where it is stressed that activity systems take shape and get transformed over lengthy periods of time. The *fourth* principle highlights the central role of contradictions as sources of change and development. Finally, the *fifth* principle, the expansive transformation in activity systems, sheds a light on how activity systems can go through changes and expand as Engeström illustrates with

the 'expansive learning cycle' (see Figure 2). In this article we utilise the last two principles in line with the aim of the study, namely the role of *contradictions* and *the expansive learning cycle*.

Methodology and methods

The aim of the presented study is to explore, describe, and interpret the views and understandings of SPs about the social pedagogue in an inclusive school. The questions we seek to answer in this paper are: How do SPs view and perceive the status of inclusivity within their working environment in inclusive primary schools? And how can SPs and the social pedagogical approach contribute to the learning actions needed for further development of inclusive school practices?

The data is derived from two main sources; a half-open questionnaire and focus group interviews. The questionnaire consisted of 30 questions many with the possibility of further explanations and expression of views and opinions. The questionnaire was designed in line with the aim of the study and research questions. The questionnaire together with an introductory letter was sent to the members of the Association of Social Pedagogues in Iceland $N = 789$ by e-mail. Total of 468 SPs responded (59.31%). About 50% of the respondents worked with children and youth in schools and leisure as stated before. Most respondents had practised for less than 30 years.

The questionnaire gave a rich body of information on the views and experiences of SPs working in schools and this high proportion raised our interest in gaining deeper knowledge about their professional existence within the schools. For that purpose, we followed up the questionnaire with focus-group interviews. Three focus-group interviews were performed with the total of 20 participants working within Icelandic inclusive primary schools, selected with purposive sampling where we deliberately selected the subjects against one or more trait to give what is believed to be a representative sample (Gray, 2009). Opportunities of purposeful sampling were the possible inclusion of new perspectives in line with the aim of the study such as duration from graduation as a SP, diverse work experience within the school system and further education. Data gathering lasted from June 2015 until December 2016.

Texts provided by the participants' from the open questions in the questionnaire regarding the work of SPs within inclusive primary schools and the transcribed focus-group interviews were sources for qualitative analysis. They were carefully read and sorted by content according to the aim of the study. The data analysis was guided by the work process recommended for descriptive qualitative analysis (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2008). Hence, open coding was performed with codes emerging from the transcribed text and the answers to the open questions in the questionnaire, followed by focused coding to validate similarities and differences with the themes from both sources. The developing coding categories were then thoroughly examined to identify relationships between them to better understand various aspects of the SPs views and lived experiences. The mixing of these two sources gave a fuller image of the subject under scrutiny and allowed us to interpret the findings in more depth with the help of Engeström's expansive learning cycle (2000) (see Figure 2). The previously described methods allowed us to grasp the lived experiences and professional perspectives of SPs working within inclusive schools in line with the research questions. In the following sections we begin by giving an insight into the key findings, which we then discuss in more detail with the help of Engeström's expansive learning cycle (Figure 2).

Summary of findings: Social pedagogues in inclusive primary schools

In the summary of findings presented here we give an insight into how the SPs view and perceive the status of inclusivity within the schools. Moreover, we attempt to cast a light on their contributing role and learning actions needed for further development of inclusive schooling.

There is a common consensus among the SPs in the study regarding the importance of inclusive education for disabled children which they refer to as an important human right manifested in the CRC and CRPD. The SPs express a shared understanding of the term inclusive education and many draw attention to how it is conceptualized in Article 24 of the CRPD, such as the right to receive the support required for full participation in the school community without segregation. The SPs who have a long standing within segregated work settings and the school system in general are concerned about the disempowering effect of segregated education, such as stigma, restriction of opportunities and low self-esteem. There they refer

to their experiences in diverse working environments that puts emphases upon individual deficit, like the individual medical understanding does, instead of looking at the failure of the schools to provide a quality education to all children according to need which the social-relational model underlines. Some of the SPs stress that the medical understanding is the greatest hindrance towards the achievement of successful inclusion. In this context some SPs articulate how important it is to provide a school environment free from discriminatory attitudes and practices. They talk about witnessing negative attitudes towards the existence of disabled children within the inclusive schools and mention labeling, stigmatizing and ignoring and are concerned about how this attitude affects the children's sense of belonging and overall growth. There is a common thread in the data where the SPs bring attention to the fact that they are usually employed to support disabled students who have a diagnostic categorization and are legally entitled to special educational support. They describe how these children, especially those with high support needs and 'challenging behavior' are placed in segregated units under the SP's supervision. There they would like to see an increased shared professional commitment in developing inclusive support measures both academically and socially.

There is a consensus among the participating SPs on the complex tasks at hand regarding negotiating expertise and identity in line with the aim of inclusive schools. Many SPs see the CRC and the CRPD as powerful legal instruments with which to ensure and inform others about the rights of every child to quality education that 'leads to a new way of thinking about disability', as one SP noted. Many highlight the importance of a shared understanding of inclusive education, taking a rights-based approach as well as to address the barriers to the realization of this right for children and their families. It seems to be an overall view among the SPs that a successful holistic approach involves careful planning according to needs both on a daily and weekly basis to ensure belonging and wellbeing. They emphasize strongly that one must think and plan the support for, for example, recess, lunch breaks, and extra-curricular activities such as swimming, sports, and crafts. One SP articulates her thoughts about this and adds: 'In my school I feel that we are starting to develop our thinking about the educational support in a more innovative manner, such as focusing on the whole child in all aspects of school life'. Another takes this discussion further by sharing her views and experiences of how powerful it can be to shift focus from the child's challenging behaviour to environmental factors and preventive practices. In this regard she emphasizes awareness of the children's difficulties when exposed to a large group of children, causing insecurity in often frightening and noisy circumstances. She takes for an example all unguarded spaces both outside and inside the school as well as a lack of structure in the classroom and unclear instructions. Finally, she points out how outbursts of challenging behavior can be caused by communication difficulties, prejudice, and often the negative attitudes of others. This turns the discussion to the importance of facilitating peer relations and friendship-building within inclusive schools to enable disabled children's involvement and participation right from the beginning, as one SP highlights when she says: 'According to my experience it is essential to educate and guide the classmates and other peers about diversity, social justice and equity early on. I have sensed how this makes a difference when the children reach adolescence.' The SPs in the study show strong commitment to their work within the inclusive schools and highlight the need for new and innovative ways of developing resources and adjusting support measures and learning materials to meet individual needs.

Discussion and implications in light of the expansive learning theory

Engeström (2000) developed the 'expansive learning theory' and presented a model of the *expansive learning cycle* for analysing and supporting organizational development as displayed in Figure 2. The theory of expansive learning puts the primacy on the collective community learning for the creation of new culture. Following the theory, expansive learning is predicated upon a progression from individuals questioning the state of the art in current practice through the modelling of new forms of practice as our findings indicate (Engeström, 2016, p. 36). It captures the dynamics that arise when people who are engaged in an activity begin to recognise new complexities in the tasks they are working on, that is, they expand their object of activity. These dynamics may be seen in how they begin to use familiar resources in innovative ways, develop new ideas as they use those resources, question the practices that get in the way of their work and begin to work with different people or the same people in new ways (Engeström,

1987, 2001). In this context Engeström (2001) points out that such transformations of professional and organisational practices direct the community of practice towards learning new activities that are not yet there. Contradictions are present in every collective activity and indicate emergent opportunity for further development. They are the lenses through which participants in an activity can reflect on the developmental trajectory of the activity system and understand its dynamics. Contradictions can be understood as illuminative hinges that can open new vistas of understanding (Foot, 2014).

What we found to be the most serious contradiction when analysing the findings in this context is the discrepancy between the official aim of inclusive schooling, the SPs' professional values and the reality they face in their day to day work. The SPs believe that this mismatch is caused by the common lack of awareness of disabled children's entitled rights to inclusive education and the importance for all children to be part of their local school community. The findings indicate that this mismatch is embedded in the still prevailing medical view on disability and historic systemic thinking. This appears in the lack of consensus among stakeholders within inclusive school on the understandings of the concept of inclusion and what it means in practice. This coincides with the findings from the external audit from the [European Agency on inclusive schooling in Iceland \(2017\)](#).

In the analyses of the contradictions and challenges faced by the SPs in our study we drew on Engeström (1987) distinction between three types of contradictions; *primary contradictions*, *secondary contradictions*, *tertiary contradictions*. The relationships between these types of contradictions are challenging to grasp but important to understand because they are what enables multidimensional analysis of complex activity systems such as those entailed in the provision of inclusive schooling.

Primary contradictions: The paradigm shift in disability policy in accordance with the CRPD

The primary contradictions play a central role in the first face in the expansive learning cycle (Figure 2) and can arise when practitioners start questioning the practices of their activities.

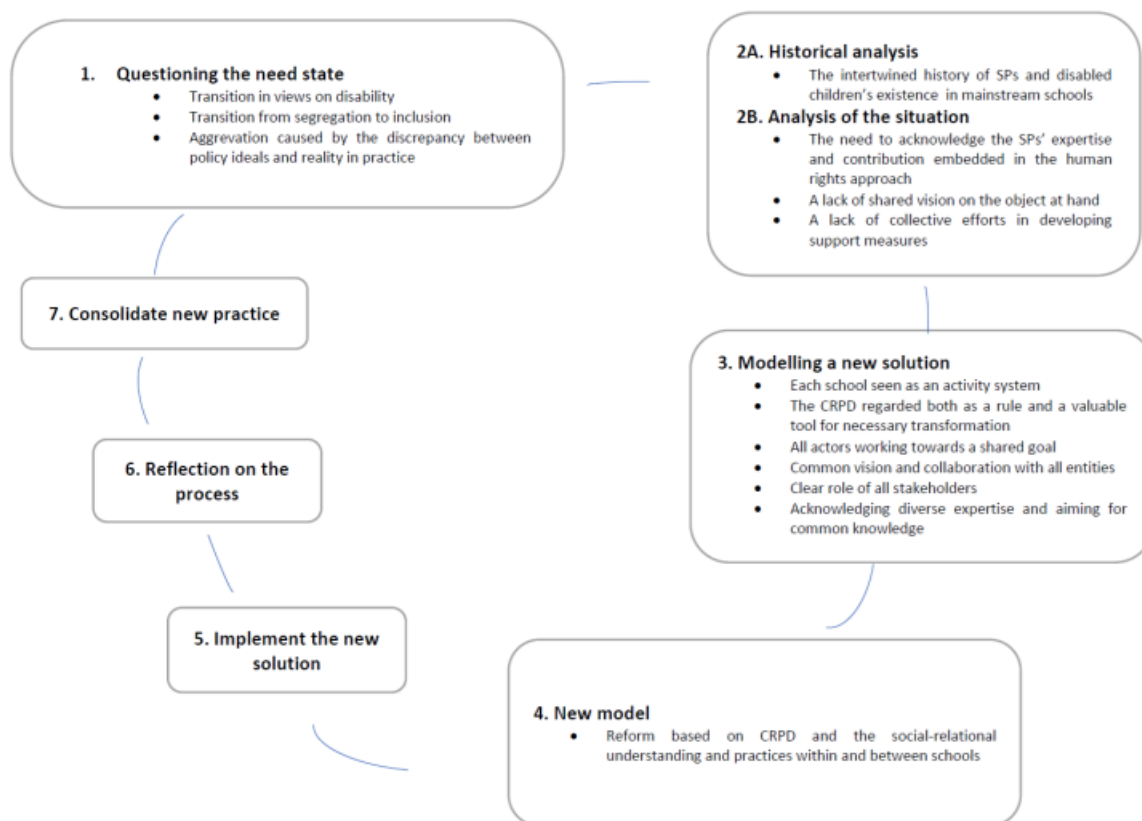


Figure 2 The expansive learning cycle (adapted from Engeström, 2000).

We see primary contradictions at play in our data when the SPs describe their work within the primary schools as complex and often time consuming due to lack of shared vision on the core values of inclusive education. One SP explains it this way:

I feel like there is a different understanding on what inclusive education means among the school staff. . . so there is a need for a dialogue about the importance of inclusive education for all students and to build awareness of the children's entitled rights. I am tired of constantly having to explain that the students placed in special units still belong to the school community and are not to be forgotten.

Another SP underlines the importance of a holistic view in educational planning and provisions where academic knowledge, social development and wellbeing are seen as equally important for all students. This view complies with another argument made by a SP who talks about the importance of valuing all students equally and to have high aspirations for all not just focus on the academic subjects. Moreover, she finds it important to 'build on individual strengths and interests and value social learning as a desirable outcome'. Many of the respondents draw attention to children's entitled rights manifested in the CRPD such as the rights to receive the support required for full participation in the school community without segregation. They see the safeguarding and promotion of these rights as their fundamental role within inclusive schools. Many stress that the concept of inclusion is in need of further clarification and claim that it is being confused with the concept of integration, without a clear distinction to their implementation in practice which coincides with [Byrne \(2013\)](#).

Secondary contradictions – Double bind: Tensions between policy and practice

Secondary contradictions arise when a new element enters a system and leads to contradictions between the elements that pre-dated it ([Engeström, 2001](#)). The paradigm change in understanding disability requires schools to rethink their aims, structure and practices according to the CRPD. This is clearly experienced by the SPs in the study, where they highlight the gap between inclusive education ideology and actual school practice, often in segregated settings as noted by an experienced SP who says: 'thinking in the medical way can result in segregating solutions which have the tendency to marginalise the children and also us as professionals'. In this light it needs to be noted that the history of disabled students and the history of the SPs within the inclusive schools are intertwined. Thus, both the disabled students and the SPs have been striving for recognition of their existence on equal bases with others. When the SPs reflect on the main hindrances in the light of their status within the inclusive schools there is a great consensus that their unclear roles and lack of job descriptions framing their inclusive responsibilities is a great barrier. This often results in misleading demands and contradicting roles. Moreover, SPs in the study strongly emphasise that inclusive schooling is a collaborative effort where all stakeholders are equally responsible for creating a human rights culture aspiring to quality education for all students. Two examples reflect these points of view. Firstly, to mention is the SPs' concern about children that have been placed in segregated units, detached from the mainstream school environment. Secondly, they draw attention to the students that are placed within the mainstream classes without proper support and resources, making them feel 'humiliated' and 'isolated'. It seems to be an overall view among the SPs that a successful holistic approach involves careful planning according to needs both on a daily and weekly basis to ensure belonging and wellbeing.

Tertiary contradictions: Modelling a new solution

The third strategic action in the expansive learning cycle is *modelling*. Modelling is already involved in the formulation of expansive learning and the results of the analysis of contradictions. It reaches its fruition in the modelling of *the new solution*, the new pattern of activity. The contradictions drawn out of the findings show conflicts and structural tensions that have been historically accumulating due to the evolution of the concept of inclusive education and its ideal in line with the aforementioned paradigm shift rooted in the CRPD. Our findings indicate the urgency of reconceptualization of the activity under scrutiny within the inclusive schools in order to ensure successful inclusion for all. One can argue that this sense of urgency has directed the SPs towards developing new and innovative practices, which are learned

as they are created. They express how they attempt to meet children's individual needs in a holistic way and promote collaboration among stakeholders. In their work they strive for developing support measures in light of the requirements made by the CRPD. It can be argued that the SPs innovative initiatives are guided by their historical knowledge about the disempowering effects of segregated education and how it restricts the disabled children's access to full range of opportunities in all realms of life. In this light the SPs call for a collaborative action of all stakeholders to ensure that the human rights-based vision manifested in Article 24 of the CRPD is adopted in more depth into the school culture. Furthermore, they see that expansive transformation can be accomplished through shared goals in interprofessional work across boundaries which call for unpacking differences and finding ways of working together. One SP argues in this context:

Clearer roles and job descriptions for all entities involved are needed, reflecting the roles and duties within the inclusive school environment in order to safeguard the entitled rights of every student both academically and socially. We all must share our expertise and experience, so every student feels safe and welcomed.

Conclusion

Dilemmas and contradictions are apparent in our findings when the SPs draw attention to the gap between the aims of inclusive schooling and the reality in practices which they claim is caused by lack of awareness of children's rights and the importance of inclusive schooling for their lives. In this context they stress that the right in question must be realised by all stakeholders who are equally responsible for creating a human rights culture aspiring at quality education for all students in line with the standards proclaimed by Article 24 in the CRPD. Our findings show as well how the SPs view the contradictions and tensions that they experience in their daily work as an opportunity for creative innovations for new ways of structuring school practices towards a more successful inclusion. One can therefore argue that it is of great importance to acknowledge the hidden value of social pedagogical thinking and practices in the expansive learning process within the inclusive schools. Moreover, the SPs' awareness of relational and holistic thinking is of importance when they stress the need for increased collaboration with all stakeholders, including the children and their families. Thus, we argue that it is important to acknowledge and utilise the SPs professional expertise embedded in the human rights approach and their innovative practices as part of transformative expansive learning culture and collective change effort in accordance with policy ideals. Each school needs to be seen as an activity system on its own that works independently on new ways of knowing, thinking and learning according to the new paradigm following the ratification of the CRPD. Finally, we strongly agree with [de Beco \(2017\)](#) when he describes how the adoption of the CRPD has led to a rights-based approach to the issue of inclusive education and highlights that the question is no longer about why inclusive education is beneficial to disabled children, but how it can be achieved. This thought is at the heart of social pedagogical thinking in Iceland today where rights-based principles and practices are at the forefront as is articulated by one SP in our study when she says:

I see the CRPD as the guiding light in everything that we do . . . together with our ethical protocol. These are the tools that help us to stay on the right track . . . and ensure that our practices and provisions coincide with the standards manifested in the CRPD. We are still a long way from reaching this goal.

Declarations and conflict of interests

This project was registered with the Data Protection Agency in Iceland. The questionnaire together with an introductory letter, which provided informed consent, was sent to the members of the Association of Social Pedagogues in Iceland through the Educational Research Institute at the University of Iceland. Prior to the focus group interviews participants received an introductory letter which provided informed consent and was repeated when the interviews took place.

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