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Article

Leisure and youth clubs' work with young people of ethnic minority background living in socially deprived housing areas: creating processes of hope and empowerment through social pedagogical work

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Abstract

This article gives an analysis of social pedagogical work in leisure and youth clubs, physically located in so-called socially deprived housing areas in Denmark. The pedagogical work is especially aimed at young boys of ethnic minority background. The article draws on empirical research from a project exploring leisure and youth clubs' impact on children and young people's well-being and opportunities for development when growing up in socially deprived housing areas. The social pedagogical work seems very closely related to societal issues moving into the pedagogical everyday

life of the leisure and youth clubs. These clubs, besides embracing the children and young people's active leisure life in communities with other children and young people, are thus also instrumental in helping and supporting the children and young people to cope with an everyday life that features experiences of stigmatising and inequality-shaped living conditions. The social pedagogical work is analysed from the perspectives of the pedagogues and young people, taking their point of view to what seems particularly significant to the well-being and development of the young people based on Scandinavian-German critical psychology. This is integrated with Paulo Freire's notion of hope and empowerment, which is the analytical framework within the context of social pedagogical work concerned with how the young men develop belief in themselves for them to complete their education, get a job in after-school hours and refrain from involvement in crime and gang-related communities.

Keywords leisure and youth clubs; socially deprived housing areas; young people from ethnic minority background; social pedagogy; hope; empowerment

Introduction

This article focuses on social pedagogical work in leisure and youth clubs, aimed at young men of ethnic minority background¹ who grow up and live their everyday lives in socially deprived housing areas.² The article is based on an empirical study of leisure and youth clubs in three different socially deprived housing areas in Denmark,³ and in this context is specifically centred on the part of the empirical material concerned with the young men's perspectives on participating in the communities of leisure and youth clubs (Højholt, 2016, 2018; Kousholt, 2016). At the same time, the article deals with the pedagogues' perspectives on their work with these young men, based on the specific contexts in which the social pedagogical work takes place (Dreier, 2015; Petersen, 2009, 2019, 2021; Schwartz, 2014).

Several studies, both in a Nordic and international context, have pointed out that growing up with an ethnic minority background from the so-called third-world countries is considered one of the biggest inequality factors related to, for example, education, in almost all modern Western societies today (Becker, Boldin and Klein, 2016; Becker and Tuppatt, 2018). In European OECD countries especially, youths with an ethnic minority background still lag behind their non-migrant peers (by over half a school year for their reading scores at the age of 15). Additionally, the vast majority of children and young people of ethnic minority background grow up in so-called socially deprived housing areas. Within urban and housing sociology research these are often defined as special housing areas for poorer citizens with ethnic minority backgrounds, which also represent physical symbols of segregated, socially excluded and marginalised groups (Jensen, Petersen and Wind, 2012; Petersen, 2015, 2017, 2021; Swartz, 2009; Wacquant, 2008a, 2008b).

In an international context, research into the upbringing, everyday lives and development of children and young people residing in socially deprived housing areas is comprehensive and interdisciplinary. This research field has, among other things, identified how growing up in such areas poses an increased risk of being involved in criminal activity, including moving into gangs (Del Carmen et al., 2009; Petersen and Ladefoged, 2018; Trasher, 1927; Vigil, 2002; Whyte, 1943). In addition to this, comprehensive international research points out social, emotional and learning difficulties in children (Brody et al., 2001; Ingoldsby et al., 2006; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Winslow and Shaw, 2007), as well as studies showing lack of affiliation to high-quality day care and school (Becker et al., 2016; Becker and Schober, 2017; Fröhlich-Gildhoff and Roennau-Boese, 2011; Watamura, Phillips, Morrissey, McCartney and Bub, 2011). Research studies also identify difficulties with education and working life for these children in the longer term, as well as health problems (Vasquez and Pitts, 2006).

In a Nordic context, Sernhede (2009, 2011, 2018) has identified how these housing areas are often the subject of social and media discourses that demonise living conditions in ways that create fear, especially for young men from ethnic minority backgrounds. This fear is often related to the young men's ethnicity, race and religion (Lagermann, 2014) as well as crime, violence and gang-related activities (Petersen, 2015, 2019; Petersen and Ladefoged, 2018). Sernhede (2009) pointed out that these

societal and media discourses have created stigmatised processes that have banished young people to 'demarcated reservations which leave only limited contact with the surrounding community' (p. 21).

Similar points have been raised in research related to leisure and youth clubs. Several studies highlight the fact that the physical location of the clubs in socially deprived housing areas expands their pedagogical work. This work includes many different social pedagogical efforts, such as preventing children and young people from growing up in poverty, reducing the risk of movement into crime, as well as supporting improvements in the children's schooling while functioning as a physical location that provides protection from a life on the streets (Anderson-Butcher and Conroy, 2002; McDaniel and Yarbrough, 2016; McCrary, 2019; Petersen and Sørensen, 2021; Petersen, Sørensen, Sørensen and Ladefoged, 2019).

This article belongs to the field of research related to leisure and youth clubs' work in socially deprived housing areas associated with social pedagogical work with children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds (Petersen, 2021; Petersen and Sørensen, 2021; Petersen et al., 2019; Sernhede, 2009, 2011, 2018). The theoretical basis of the article draws on critical psychology and social theory of practice (Dreier, 1997; Holzkamp, 1983, 1998, 2005; Schraube and Osterkamp, 2013) as this tradition unfolds within the social research field concerned with the everyday lives of children and young people. This orientates the analysis of the everyday lives of the young people and their opportunities for participating in the pedagogical institutions that are a fundamental part of the Danish welfare society (Højholt, 2005, 2018; Morin, 2021; Petersen, 2019; Schwartz, 2014). The tradition of critical psychology, as developed particularly in a German–Danish context (Dreier, 1997; Holzkamp, 1983; Schraube and Osterkamp, 2013), is related to the socio-cultural approaches defined as cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). In this context, both Stetsenko (2008) and Mørck (2011) emphasise on a variety of theoretical perspectives that explore the importance of culture and society in relation to human learning, development and participation in society.

The article focuses more specifically on social pedagogical efforts in leisure and youth clubs and how the organisation of these efforts seem to have an impact on the everyday lives of the young men and their opportunities for participating in society. The analyses of the data material are based on Freire's concepts related to creating and developing processes of hope and empowerment (Freire, 2014, 2017), which seem to dominate the pedagogical work in everyday life with the young men. Freire's critical pedagogy of possibility offers a theoretical and practical approach to pedagogy, which is not solely unfolded in school and educational contexts; however, in this context, it is brought into play in the analyses of leisure pedagogy, with a focus on empowering young people to change their life situations.

The article first explains the theoretical approaches, method and data basis. It then analyses three areas: (1) how the pedagogical staff in the leisure and youth clubs assess and organise the social pedagogical work; (2) how the various pedagogical efforts contribute to creating hope for change for the young men; and (3) how especially the relationship between the young men (as well as the relationship between the young men and the pedagogical staff) opens up for processes of empowerment for them to experience new opportunities for action in their everyday lives. The concluding discussion first summarises the empirical results and then highlights the theoretical points in relation to the social pedagogical work in leisure and youth clubs located in socially deprived housing areas.

Theoretical perspectives: social pedagogical work in leisure and youth clubs

The concept of social pedagogy is often used as a collective term for a large number of theoretical and methodological approaches, as well as ways in which social pedagogical work unfolds in practice (Bouverne-De Bie, Coussée, Roose and Bradt, 2019; Jensen, 2019). Despite the many different approaches, the common understanding of social pedagogy is the associated relationship between individual and society and is always closely related to social, cultural, political and economic conditions in society (Jensen, 2019). The societal processes associated with industrialisation, proletarianisation and urbanisation have, over time, developed social pedagogy into a method of seeking to solve poverty and vulnerable living conditions, especially for young people. Traditionally, in a Danish context, social pedagogy is not considered to be related to pedagogical work taking place in leisure and youth clubs, but rather a general pedagogy related to opportunities for an active leisure life in the Danish welfare state for all children and young people (Petersen and Sørensen, 2021). However, Hansen (2014) pointed out

that in a historical perspective the contours of social pedagogical thinking are evident, especially when they are aimed at young people who did not attend school, education or work. These young people were thus at risk of hanging out on the streets and as a consequence were encouraged to participate in leisure and youth club activities. Bouverne-De Bie et al. (2019) pointed out that social pedagogy, no matter how it is put into practice, is a fundamental way of thinking because all children and young people, despite an upbringing in poverty and socially vulnerable living conditions, have strengths and competencies that social pedagogical work can develop and support.⁴ Jensen (2019) substantiated this point as he argues that social pedagogy must be approached as a discipline that fundamentally relates to social justice. Its purpose is defined as the promotion of development and living conditions for children, young people and the elderly, as well as for the socially threatened and threatening children (Jensen, 2019).

Social pedagogical work in leisure and youth clubs must be associated with the contexts in which the clubs are physically located, and not detached from this (Petersen, 2009, 2021). This means that the theoretical analyses of the article are rooted in the fact that leisure and youth clubs must be seen as a social practice or a specialised context (Lave and Wenger, 2004; Wenger, 2004) and as a societal practice embedded in historical and current societal structures and processes (Dreier, 2004). The emphasis on the importance of context is founded on critical psychological theory, also called the subject scientific tradition, which maintains that the everyday lives of people, their actions and experiences must be analysed based on the specific contexts in which they live their lives (Dreier, 1997; Højholt, 2018; Holzkamp, 2005; Schraube and Osterkamp, 2013).

At the same time, leisure and youth clubs are seen as a social community of practice that takes place in a variety of social structures with different parties' interests and positions, and in the analyses of social pedagogical work, pedagogues, children and young people must necessarily be included as active participating subjects (Holzkamp, 2013). The pedagogical practice is thus determined by the pedagogues' experience, opportunities, difficulties and conflicts both for themselves and for the children and young people, and by the children and young people's participation in the community, as well as the objective social circumstances and conditions in which the youth clubs work and are embedded (Petersen, 2021). For all children and young people, this entails a sense of belonging and opportunities for participation in society, based in general terms on children's and young people's lives (Schwartz, 2014). Freire's critical pedagogy serves as the understanding of social pedagogical work with the children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds who grow up in socially deprived housing areas. Such social pedagogical work seems to rest on pedagogical activities and efforts centred on creating processes of hope and empowerment in the children and young people, which open up new options, new understandings and opportunities for changes in the youngsters' everyday lives (Freire, 2014, 2017). In his work with theoretical analyses, Freire focused on education as a practice of freedom, and in this context he followed a large number of education projects in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s. The connection between liberation and education – especially for disadvantaged populations – is crucial in Freire's theoretical work. Central to Freire's argument is that theory must be connected to practice and that human actions are always intentional and meaningful activities situated within a dynamic historical context that shapes and sets limits on that activity (Archibald and Wilson, 2011; Carrillo, 2007; Freire, 1970). The concept of empowerment is crucial in Freire's work and relates to 'understanding social, political and economic contradictions and the ability to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (Freire, 1970, p. 19).

The discussion about the concept of empowerment connected to education and pedagogy has been key since the inception of Freire's work into the concept. Andersen (2018), in particular, argues that the concept of empowerment in relation to social and pedagogical work must be connected to action strategies in pedagogical practice aimed at improving underprivileged groups' control over their living conditions.

However, in the discussions of empowerment associated with social pedagogical work with socially vulnerable, stigmatised and marginalised groups in society, the concept of hope seems to disappear. In Freire's work, this was closely connected to the ability to take action; indeed, in Freire (1970) it is seen as an ontological necessity for human life, which at the same time indicates that humans can be paralysed by a sense of hopelessness.

Freire emphasises how actions of change cannot be initiated without hope. He points out that hope is an 'understanding of history as opportunity and not determinism' (Freire, 2014, p. 91). Closely intertwined with the concept of empowerment is thus the pedagogical work of creating hope, or as Freire (1970, 2014) emphasises, help to build dreams, to reinvent utopias and to spread hope of change.

The article's method and data basis

The empirical core of the article is based on a comprehensive qualitative study that includes leisure and youth clubs in three different socially deprived housing areas in Denmark. The research project covered the period August 2018 to August 2019 and in the process, we followed heads of leisure and youth clubs, pedagogues as well as children and young people, where leisure and youth clubs, youth cafés and special social housing initiatives aimed at children and young people aged between 12 and 25 have been established in these housing areas.⁵

The methodological approach of the research project includes a series of data collected in collaboration with pedagogues, children and young people over a year, in three different housing areas.

Observations have been made based on ethnographically inspired fieldwork in the various leisure and youth clubs, including participation in staff meetings, supervision and department meetings and meetings with various partners, such as school teachers, police/SSP⁶ and social workers. In addition, the data is based on three qualitative semi-structured research interviews with management and three qualitative focus group interviews with 15 pedagogues. Furthermore, a questionnaire survey was conducted aimed at pedagogues, management and relevant partners related to the pedagogical work. Eight focus group interviews were also conducted with 20 children and young people in the various leisure and youth clubs.

Meaning, explanations and actions: reading the empirical material

For the housing area of Grønnehaven,⁷ this article takes a methodological approach based on fieldwork in the two leisure and youth clubs' activities and investigates everyday life in the locality. As well as research interviews with young people, pedagogues and management, there was participation in a number of staff and supervision meetings.

The analytical readings of the data material specifically focus on exploring how the social pedagogical work emerges in the clubs' work – in particular from the perspectives of the pedagogues – and how the work seems to have an impact on the young people's well-being and development (seen from the perspectives of the youngsters themselves). For analytical readings of the data material, a decentralised analytical approach is maintained as a framework that takes the assumption that humans' everyday lives and actions are always related to opportunities and limitations as they emerge in and across contexts (Dreier, 1997; Højholt, 2016, 2018; Lagermann, 2014; Petersen, 2019, 2021).

Both theoretically and analytically, the study within critical psychology is engaged in exploring meanings and explanations to how problems, challenges and opportunities arise for both pedagogues and young people alike, and meanwhile draw attention to experiences for options contextualised in pedagogical practice (Bechmann Jensen, 2005; Dreier, 1979; Holzkamp, 2013; Markard, Holzkamp and Dreier, 2004).

The pedagogues and the young people's actions and experiences of opportunities and conditions for action play a central role in the analyses. The action-oriented element has an analytical approach while it remains connected to Freire's critical pedagogy perspective, as Freire (1970, 2014) argues for the importance of becoming subjects, rather than objects, through conversation and action based on shared practice. The analytical readings particularly show the pedagogues' preoccupation with encouraging the young people to 'come in and participate' in the leisure and youth club's activities and community, rather than hanging out on the streets and thus being at risk of committing crime. The pedagogical work also seems to entail relationships with the young men. For the young men, these relationships give rise to a sense of leisure community, in unison with other young people, and relationships that provide opportunities for action with the aim of changing the living conditions for young people, in particular in terms of school, education and work. As analytical aspects, these actions open up the possibility for social pedagogical work, situated in the pedagogical practice, to constantly be occupied with opportunities for new understandings and actions related to the young men's life opportunities associated with the creation of experiences of hope and empowerment.

The leisure and youth club located in a socially deprived housing area: social pedagogical work

Predominantly young men from ethnic minority backgrounds visit the leisure and youth clubs located in the housing area Grønnehaven – especially in the evening. Both pedagogues and heads of leisure and youth clubs also refer to this area as being one of particularly deprived housing placed on the so-called ghetto list,⁸ which at times has been exposed to a lot of trouble. On several occasions, vandalism, crime and local gangs have targeted the housing. In this area, there have been several conflicts between different street gangs, which have led to shootings, violence and knife attacks. At the same time, local pedagogues define how many children and young people have difficulties when growing up in Grønnehaven. Multiple people often live together in apartments that are too small, and most of the parents lack employment. In fact, the homes do not really have adequate space for the young men, which is why they often hang out on the street, especially in the evening (Petersen et al., 2019).

During the period of data collection, and more particularly during staff and supervision meetings, several pedagogues pointed out what is perceived as being particularly difficult for the young men, seen from the pedagogues' perspective (Dreier, 2004; Højholt, 2018; Petersen, 2021).

Three issues in particular seem to concern the pedagogues in their discussions during staff and supervision meetings. First is the issue that numerous young boys often join the leisure and youth club after going through many bad experiences with adults, such as school teachers, police and their parents. The bad experiences are not only related to school, when young boys are not especially gifted, or to confrontation with the police, but also to domestic matters, when their parents, not considering their behaviours, such as skipping school, to be appropriate, often scold them at home. This means that the pedagogues assess the need to invest a lot of time creating good relationships with these young people. These relationships are based on respect and trust, and according to the experiences of the pedagogues, interactions with the young men can be very fragile and require constant attention to maintain. Second is the issue that everyday life consists of school and leisure taking place solely within the housing area, which has the effect that many of the children and young people very rarely get outside the often 'invisible' urban boundaries that surround the housing area. Thus, in many ways, they live their lives disconnected from the surrounding community. The third issue for the youngsters is that of difficulty participating in society beyond the housing area; this is because the outside world associates these young men with criminal behaviour, violence and hanging out in large groups making trouble. These issues show how actions outside the club are brought inside and seem to constitute the conditions for the pedagogues' work in the everyday practice (Petersen, 2021; Schwartz, 2014). Concerns about the young people's lives, as well as the pedagogues' emphasis on the importance of relationships in their work, help to identify how social pedagogical work conducts a constant link to societal and political conflicts, challenges and dilemmas. This will have an impact on how the pedagogues, seen from their own perspectives, assess the organisation of their work in the youth clubs (Højholt, 2016; Schwartz, 2014).

The head of the leisure and youth club explains that a significant pedagogical task involves helping the young people to relate to their own futures, their schooling, job opportunities and to achieve skills, such as boxing or football. However, helping the young people to join the leisure and youth club also involves a lot of hard work, since they often distrust the pedagogues at the beginning. As the head of the leisure and youth club points out, the young men have experiences of distrust by people such as social workers, school teachers and the police.

The young men often seem to spend their time and energy at the local police station on in the housing area, as the head of the leisure and youth club points out. The police are perceived as 'enemy no. 1' for many of them, who since their early adolescence have had numerous experiences of being stopped, asked to leave the local shopping centres or being suspected of causing unrest and trouble in the area.

You see, these boys have been subjects to early contact with the police, which you and I have never experienced in our entire lives, not even when we were young. (Interview with head of leisure and youth club, October 2018)

On one of the first evenings when conducting fieldwork in one of the youth clubs in this housing area, the young men met me under the impression that I 'must be from the police'. We were gathered in the club's premises, and in attendance were a number of club staff, myself and approximately 30 young

men aged 15–25 years. The young men were curious about who I was; they approached me, we shook hands and they introduced themselves. I also introduced myself and told them that I am a researcher, and that I would be conducting fieldwork in various leisure and youth clubs in Denmark with the purpose of exploring the clubs' impact on children and young people's everyday lives and leisure time.

The following excerpts from my diary notes outline the first meeting with Ahmed, one of the young men attending the youth club. Ahmed asked if I was a researcher with the police. I looked at Ahmed and answered 'No: I am a researcher at the university.' Ahmed asked me again if I am also employed as a researcher with the police. 'No, I am only employed at the university as a researcher and lecturer,' I explained in detail. Ahmed asked if I know 'Ole'. I told him 'No, I do not believe I do', and I asked if he is also employed at the same university. Ahmed explained that Ole is an investigator with the police and is one of those 'who are always chasing us'. I explained that I do not know any police officers at all. Apparently, Ahmed cannot imagine that. He laughed and said that he 'knows them all'. Some of the other young men also laughed and said that all the police officers 'know Ahmed'.

The meeting with Ahmed and the other young people, whom I follow through the fieldwork, helped to conceptualise how the social pedagogical work in the leisure and youth clubs emerges and to draw attention to what the pedagogues are particularly concerned with in the pedagogical practice. The work of the pedagogues seems to be focused on creating better opportunities for young people in their everyday lives and their futures. In the opinion of the pedagogues, the young people are in possession of many resources, but owing to their circumstances, their opportunities to cope in life are under pressure. In this context, the pedagogues' opinions are in line with the historical development of social pedagogy, which, with various out-of-school activities over time, has regarded young people as competent subjects in their own lives and through support, and prevention can help young people to find and realise their own strengths (Bouverne-De Bie et al. 2019). At the same time, the pedagogues' perspectives indicate that these form a close-knit connection with the other professions of the welfare state (for example, school teachers and social workers) and are connected in their work by striving for the well-being, development and learning of children and young people. However, these perspectives must be regarded as different in terms of responsibilities, focus and specific pedagogical work tasks. Højholt (2016) pointed out how the perspectives of these welfare state professions are not *randomly different*, but must be seen as having differences in positions and division of responsibilities in a welfare state and complex pedagogical structure.

When analysing how social pedagogical work unfolds in specific social practice (Schwartz, 2014), two interrelated efforts emerge: efforts aimed at counteracting experiences of hopelessness among young men and efforts that initiate processes of empowerment to create changes in young people's lives, through their own active participation and action (Lagermann, 2014; Mørck, 2011; Petersen, 2021).

To create hope for opportunities for change

Freire (1970, 2014) emphasised how pedagogy cannot be seen as a simple method that fits into established schemas and measurable instruments, but must be understood as a political and moral practice that can open up knowledge, skills and social relations. This opening-up seems indeed to be of importance for both heads of leisure and youth clubs and pedagogues alike when arguing how social pedagogical work unfolds in the leisure and youth clubs. Heads of leisure and youth clubs and pedagogues refer to their social pedagogical work with a focus on inclusion related to the politics of social exclusion and separation that characterises social and housing policy, especially in relation to refugees and immigrants (Petersen et al., 2019). This policy and the results that follow seem to constitute a context for the pedagogues who work in leisure and youth clubs with children and young people in the housing area of Grønnehaven (Dreier, 2004; Holzkamp, 2013).

During the research interview with Hans, the head of one of the leisure and youth clubs in Grønnehaven, he explains that many of the young men do not believe that they have a future, especially in terms of education and job opportunities. In the leisure and youth clubs, the pedagogues encounter, for example, numerous young men who may have graduated from primary school, but have not succeeded in attending a youth education programme or getting a job and therefore 'have nothing to do', as Hans clarifies. He also points out that the young people do not seek help through the municipality to find an education or to get an internship, for example, because they are afraid that it may influence their opportunities to acquire Danish citizenship.⁹ In this way, Hans emphasises, the young people are

almost caught in a hopeless situation in which they are constantly waiting for the opportunity to acquire Danish citizenship, while feeling unable to reach out and get help to prepare them for adult life. As they wait for a long time, the young men have no income, and they are not associated with any internship. This waiting period does not necessarily result in the desired Danish citizenship, since the young people have to live independently in society, earn their own money, refrain from criminal activity and so on, before citizenship can be achieved. Therefore, their situation can be characterised by both uncertainty and experiences of lack of future opportunities.

Sernhede (2018) also identified similarities with the situations highlighted by Hans and pointed to the fact that young people from ethnic minority backgrounds who live in housing estates 'see themselves as being locked into their own suburb, lacking education, and kind of desirable future and hope' (p. 241).

Young men with an ethnic minority background, who are unemployed, or are in the process of gaining education, thus seem to account for a significant part of the pedagogical work and to frame the pedagogy seen from the pedagogues' perspectives (Dreier, 2004). Hans, as well as the pedagogues, is fully engaged in establishing good contact with the young people and encouraging them to come to the club in the evenings and participate in the community and activities. 'Once we have established a good relationship, we are able to help them find work, get an internship, or apply for an education', Hans says. He also explains that helping the young men to believe in opportunities constitutes a very large part of their pedagogical work, 'even if the young people themselves do not believe', he emphasises. Holzkamp (2013) pointed out how the societal structures that create and maintain stigmatisation and exclusion processes tend to be psychologised and individualised. This issue also seems to occupy Hans and the pedagogues in the leisure and youth clubs. Hans in particular points out that the issue is not about 'the young people being wrong', but rather about 'creating opportunities for change' in the young people's lives through pedagogy.

Hope, for Freire (1970, 2014), was a practice of witnessing, an act of moral imagination that enabled progressive educators and others to think otherwise in order to act otherwise. Through a wide range of activities, as well as developing relationships with the young men, the pedagogical work in the leisure and youth clubs seems to follow a pedagogy that seeks to prevent or counteract experiences of discouragement and a sense of powerlessness in the young men. These negative feelings and experiences seem to be connected to issues encountered elsewhere in their lives; however, when they come into the clubs, the pedagogues have the opportunity to assess, interpret and organise their work around the youngsters' experiences. Dreier (2004, 2015), as well as Højholt (2016), have pointed out how the professions of the welfare state, their work in specific pedagogical contexts – and not least their subjective knowledge – are not merely situated understandings, but also able to provide analytical insight into social, historical and political structures, which in turn unfold as various pedagogical efforts.

The efforts related to homework assistance, searching for employment and participation in leisure activities that contribute to improving the young people's skills appear especially during both fieldwork and research interviews with the pedagogical staff and the young people in the leisure and youth club (Petersen et al., 2019). Homework assistance is, for example, an effort that the pedagogues consider particularly important to support and help the young people to continue schooling and improve their academic skills. This emphasis on school and education is in line with Freire's critical pedagogical thinking that education in a broad sense is considered the basis for change in people's everyday lives, and is also evident from the historical development of social pedagogy (Jensen, 2019).

Several of the pedagogues explain that homework assistance, which is implemented after school, often in a small group of young people supervised with a member of staff, helps the youngsters to become aware of the existence of opportunities for change and thus of a better schooling and education in the long run. This is despite their negative experiences, lack of skills, dissatisfaction with school and non-attendance in teaching activities.

Baskim, a pedagogue who provides homework assistance in one of the leisure and youth clubs, says that it is most important to show the young people that 'they are not stupid' and that 'there are many ways to learn' besides school. 'Most boys and young men who are attending our clubs have bad experiences with school', said Baskim, as I accompanied him to homework assistance one late Wednesday afternoon at the leisure club. Baskim indicated that most of the young boys often have difficulties in learning Danish, even though they may have been born and raised in Denmark. They also have had experience of teachers telling them that they are lagging behind their peers.

For homework assistance, Baskim gathered four young boys in a room, away from the other activities. The four young boys seemed to have complete control over what was going to happen. 'We

are working with lyrics', one of them explained to me. A rap song that they have chosen themselves played very loudly when the homework assistance began.¹⁰ The music filled the room, and Baskim and the young boys hummed along, and it became apparent that they had memorised several passages of the song. When the song ended, they discussed with great enthusiasm the subject of the lyrics. The young boys came up with several suggestions and Baskim asked that they read aloud from the lyrics so that they can present examples of the song content (from observation in leisure and youth club, November 2018).

Baskim explained to me, when the homework assistance was finished, that it is important to conduct teaching activities that the young boys find exciting and which acknowledge the boys' own contributions, such as the existence of many different interpretations of a song text, and that all the boys' contributions are important.

Freire (2014) pointed out how the creation of hope for change is instrumental in overcoming the situations that have otherwise created a climate of hopelessness. Hope demands an anchoring in transformative practices, and one of the tasks of the progressive educator is to 'unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be' (Freire, 2014, p. 9).

Hope also seems to constitute the young boys' perspectives on their participation in homework assistance. After the session, as we sit together with a soft drink, one of the young men explains how homework assistance is not at all 'like in school, but something completely different'. The 'something different' is about being a small group, who have fun while 'learning', and which at the same time provides the opportunity to 'do something completely different than we usually do'. They expressed the opinion that the 'something different' is also about the pedagogue Baskim's acknowledgement of the boys' 'skills' in understanding the texts, and him providing the opportunities for them to 'talk among each other in teaching'.

Empowerment through participation and relationships in the community

Abdel, whom we briefly met in the first part of the analysis, is one of the young men who contribute to putting focus on the importance of the relationships between young people and pedagogues through participation in the leisure and youth clubs' communities (Højholt, 2018; Kousholt, 2016; Petersen, 2021).

Along the way, through the fieldwork, I spent time with Abdel, who even though he did not seem completely convinced, still chose to accept my explanation that I do not work for the police.

We are cooking sausage horns for many hungry young men, and Abdel shows me how to fold the sausage dough in the 'right way'. Abdel is a good cook and he dreams of becoming a chef – maybe eventually opening his own restaurant. We chatted while cooking, folding the sausage dough correctly, placing the horns on baking sheets and putting them in the oven. Abdel said that he was not aware of his cooking skills. Not until he attended the leisure and youth club and the head of leisure and youth club, Hans, asked him one evening if he would help him to cook.

Abdel emphasised how he could not even imagine himself cooking, he had never tried it before, but that he and Hans had made dinner for a large group of young people 'and they ate it all'. Hans is important to Abdel, he tells me. He is 'reliable', and he 'believes in' Abdel. Hans has helped Abdel 'to a great extent'. Abdel has had an internship at a restaurant with the help of Hans, and he also arranged for Abdel's employment in the restaurant two evenings a week, when his internship was over. With Hans's help, Abdel has applied for chefs' school, where he will start in January.

My time with Abdel in the youth club, as well as the informal conversations with the other young men, has revealed the importance of the pedagogues' ways of dealing with the young men. Pedagogues are important, they are approachable, they help solve problems and help find ways out of situations that may seem difficult or hopeless. Abdel had not imagined for a moment that he could have an education, as he considered himself 'stupid in his head' and not until his internship was finished and it 'went well', did he dare to consider enrolling on a course. In addition to Abdel's stories about his experiences with the pedagogues are several international studies associated with leisure and youth clubs located in socially deprived housing areas describing relationships with staff as being key to youths' attachments to after-school programmes (Deutsch and Jones, 2008; Hirsch, 2005; Petersen and Sørensen, 2021; Strobel, Kirshner and McLaughlin, 2008). The club-as-home model, in which youths develop an emotional attachment to an organisation, driven primarily by psychosocial aspects of the place, points to how

relationships can contribute to an overarching socio-emotional experience for youngsters. According to this model, aspects of the programme, such as feeling cared for and having close relationships with adult staff, are important components of the overall environment of after-school settings that may keep youth involved as they get older.

Abdel's experiences also show how Hans's way of relating to Abdel is important: Hans 'believes in Abdel', 'respects him' and challenges Abdel to act in new ways in his life. Like several other young men, Abdel has experiences with school being a place 'not for him'. Sernhede (2018) pointed out how the purpose of schools in these areas is almost to aim to educate children and young people into acceptance of their position in society as socially marginalised and subordinate. Meanwhile, Abdel points out how his participation in the leisure and youth club community and his relationship with Hans challenges this marginalised and subordinate position and seems to provide new opportunities for Abdel to make positive changes in his life.

Freire (1970, 2014) argued that processes of empowerment can emerge in the community between teacher and student and relates to experiences of dialogue and reflection in teaching. In social pedagogical work, the relations between pedagogues and young people attending leisure and youth clubs must be seen within a situated contextual framework that maintains the young men's development in terms of empowerment. This empowerment process includes both valuable and practical activities and at the same time, they take place in communities in which both the young people and the pedagogues change conditions related to stigmatisation and exclusion (Andersen, 2018; Mørck, 2011; Stetsenko, 2008).

Conclusion

This article has developed empirical knowledge of social pedagogical work in leisure and youth clubs aimed at young men from ethnic minority backgrounds. The theoretical and analytical points emphasise how the work of leisure and youth clubs physically located in socially deprived housing areas is inspired by the social pedagogical tradition in a German and Nordic context that has focused on after-school activities aimed at children and young people in vulnerable living conditions (Bouverne-De Bie et al. 2019; Jensen, 2019). Meanwhile, the article has presented analyses of societal structures that create and maintain stigmatisation processes associated with the socially deprived housing areas and how they feature in the everyday life of the leisure and youth clubs. Through pedagogy and among the pedagogues, these structures unfold as a condition in working with young men who often encounter negative experiences in their upbringing, especially in terms of school, and as efforts specifically aimed at reducing feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness among them.

Based on the specific contexts in which pedagogues, as well as children and young people, constitute a social community of practice, and maintain the pedagogues' and young people's views and perspectives, the social pedagogical work seems to relate to the creation of hope or counteract experiences of hopelessness in young men (Sernhede, 2018).

In a social pedagogical context, new possibilities for actions in established and unchangeable life conditions relate in particular to key concepts from Freire's critical pedagogy in which the concept of hope, as a prerequisite for creating change, is crucial for people's opportunities to take action in their lives. Based on these arguments, the analysis has shown how leisure and youth clubs located in socially deprived housing areas work with a plurality of pedagogical efforts very much engaged in creating new options for the young men in their everyday lives. These new options seem to be based on social pedagogical work engaged in creating processes of hope and empowerment; processes that through actions on the part of the pedagogues and the young people open up for experience of coping better in school, gaining access to part-time jobs and planning for the future in terms of education for the young men. Freire (1970, 2014) highlighted the fact that we become subjects, rather than objects, through dialogue and action in a common practice. The inclusion of young people's perspectives, as participating subjects in their specific life practices, makes it possible to define social pedagogical work in leisure and youth clubs within the broader scope of the very complex social, political and media area associated with the upbringing of children and young people in socially deprived housing areas.

Notes

¹The term 'ethnic minority background' is here employed as related to societal power relations, as pointed out by Phoenix (2001) and Lagermann (2014). As Lagermann (2014) argued, the term 'minority' is not employed as a distinction with numerical proportions, but rather as a term that relates to societal power relations (Phoenix, 2001). The term 'ethnic' refers to young people with a non-Western background (Lagermann, 2014).

²Under the Social Housing Act the Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs defines and publishes annually a list of socially deprived residential areas (ghettos). On 1 January 2014, the government developed new criteria for socially deprived residential areas. The list includes social housing areas that have at least 1000 residents and fulfil three of the following five criteria: (1) the proportion of residents aged 18–64 years of age without connection to the labor market or education surpasses 40 per cent (average for the past two years); (2) the proportion of immigrants and descendants from non-Western countries surpasses 50 per cent; (3) the number of convicted for violation of the penal code, the gun law or the law about psychedelic drugs of residents at the age of 18 or older surpasses 2.70 per cent (average for the past two years); (4) the proportion of residents between 30–59 years of age who solely has a basic education (including unspecified education) surpasses 50 per cent of all residents in the same age group; (5) the average gross income for taxpayers aged 15–64 years of age in the area, excluding students is less than 55 per cent of the average income of the same group in the region. For the latest 2020 overview, see Transport- og Boligministeriet (2020).

³For further reading of the theoretical and methodological basis of the project as well as data analysis, see Petersen et al. (2019).

⁴Bouverne-De Bie et al. (2019) discuss the historical development of social pedagogy, including how social pedagogy is connected to social work and how these approaches share a focus on the importance of the relationship between the individual and the society. This article is recommended for a thorough and very interesting reading of this discussion.

⁵For further reading about the project's theoretical and methodological basis, as well as analyses of data material, see Petersen et al. (2019) and Petersen (2021).

⁶SSP is an alliance between social services, schools and the police for the purpose of crime prevention efforts for young people.

⁷'Grønnehaven' is an invented name to cover the housing area in question for the sake of anonymisation of the location, leisure and youth clubs, as well as children, young people and the pedagogical staff.

⁸See note 1, in which the criteria for being placed on the list of socially vulnerable housing areas are specified based on Transport- og Boligministeriet (2020).

⁹In order to acquire Danish citizenship certain conditions must be fulfilled, such as being self-sufficient and resident in Denmark, and having Danish language skills and knowledge of Denmark. It is also a condition that you must be able to support yourself. This means that you cannot have received benefits under the Law on active social policy or the Law on integration over the last two years. It also means that over the past five years you cannot have received assistance under the Law on active social policy or integration for a total period of more than four months. For more detail on rules and guidelines for Danish citizenship, see Udlændinge- og Integrationsministeriet (2021).

¹⁰During homework assistance, the young boys and Abdel listen and discuss 'Good Kid, m.A.A.d City' by the rapper Kendrick Lamar, the lyrics of which are about growing up in gang-related environments in so-called ghetto areas in the USA.

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Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work.

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