

Tritremmel, Gerald

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International journal for research on extended education : IJREE 8 (2020) 1, S. 97-103



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Tritremmel, Gerald: The professional life of leisure pedagogues at Austrian all-day schools - In: International journal for research on extended education : IJREE 8 (2020) 1, S. 97-103 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-239654 - DOI: 10.25656/01:23965

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-239654>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:23965>

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The Professional Life of Leisure Pedagogues at Austrian All-Day Schools

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Keywords: extended education, Austrian all-day schools, leisure pedagogues, training

Introduction

Research on all-day schools in Austria is rather scarce (National Education Report, 2018). The first pilot projects of open all-day schools in Austria took place during the late 80s and early 90s and they each developed differently. Although schools were based on the same legal regulations, all-day schools developed in varied manners due to organizational forms, staff situations and school structures (Hofmeister, 2012).

The demand and necessity of all-day schools and the increasing acceptance in society has led to an expansion of all-day schools in Austria. There are many pedagogical arguments for all-day schools, yet controversial discussions still exist. The crux is how successful an all-day school is and this is determined by the fact that all-day schools can only be successful if they accommodate the pupils' needs. There is no doubt that the pedagogical personnel play an important role in reaching the high expectations of all who are involved in the system (Kohler, 2016).

Although the pedagogical staff in Austrian all-day schools is predominated by teachers, more and more non-academic experts for leisure education constitute the support staff at all-day schools. The result is that pedagogues with varied qualifications and authorizations are employed within this system. The School Organization Act (SCHOG) makes it possible for the employers to use staff in the leisure time sessions, who are more in line with subjective qualifications:

“42 (2a) ... for the leisure time the necessary teachers, educators for the learning aid or leisure pedagogues are to be appointed. For leisure time, other suitable persons may also be appointed to perform the tasks in the leisure time section on the basis of special qualifications.”

An important mission of all-day schools is to offer children access to extracurricular experiences that can motivate and excite their interests; this means that all-day schools should not simply be longer school days. This demands special training for the professionals who collectively represent the skill sets needed (Vandell, & Lao, 2016).

As mentioned before, all-day schools do not have a long history in Austria, and neither does the idea of leisure education within schools. Not surprisingly, the field of work of these professionals is not well researched as the supporting staff at schools has a subordinate role within the school system. Additionally, the motivation of these pedagogues, who are responsible for a holistic education of pupils at Austria's compulsory schools, is unclear and diffuse.

For this purpose, a study was initiated with the objective to learn more about the situation of leisure pedagogues in all-day schools in Styria, one of nine federal states in Austria. In order to gain relevant information, a team of five researchers from the University College of Teacher Education Styria analyzed the current situation. The first goal of this research is to explore what characterizes these experts, who are not teachers by education. The second goal is to evaluate the training, which consists of 1500 working hours and was only recently developed. The focus is to discover more about how leisure pedagogues see themselves and what they think their job should look like.

Methodologically, this exploratory research is based on qualitative data and focuses on in-depth analysis in order to gain privileged access to the participants' everyday lives. By means of grounded theory, key themes arose from the data. Qualitative, semi-structured expert interviews were held in 2019 with 6 graduates of the leisure pedagogue training.

Focus was given to the following categories:

- job profile and job requirements
- motivation
- challenges
- training
- initiatives

Job Profile, Demands and Training

Leisure pedagogues accompany the students throughout the day. They look after students during lunchtime, animate leisure time activities and provide recreational activities primarily at the end of a school day that lasts from 8.00am to 5.00pm, as well as promote extended education (Appel, 2009). Furthermore, they help children (and teachers) by giving support whenever help with homework or learning for exams is needed, although they are legally only meant to arrange leisure programs. In this respect, leisure pedagogues also require didactics and skills concerning the organization, planning and provision of educational materials. This requires cooperation with academic staff to know about deadlines and due dates, as well as demands flexibility and multidisciplinary (Popp, 2011).

In addition to these demands, leisure pedagogues act as contact partners whenever students need help. Students have social and emotional needs and, therefore, they desire loyal and friendly contacts, who are willing to speak about problems and concerns beyond school life. The emotional engagement with student issues is one of the most important professional criteria when asked about what it takes to be a successful leisure pedagogue (Popp, 2011).

Leisure programs add to a more intimate learning environment, to new or different learning spaces, more time, supplementary materials and experiences and to a more infor-

mal environment to explore, to grow, to get excited about learning and to gain a sense of efficacy and belonging (Vandell, & Lao, 2016).

Not surprisingly, the list of duties and responsibilities of the staff is long and includes not only pedagogical tasks like pupils' guidance but also administrative tasks and school development requirements. For a detailed analysis, see: Appel, 2009.

The compilation of duties demonstrates the need for decent qualification. Professionalism is demanded and is the key topic when talking about workforce at all-day schools. Moreover, society implicitly assumes that only qualified people work in educational institutions. Also, research and practice follow the premise that work with people demands professionalism (Böttcher, Maykus, Altermann, & Liesegang, 2014).

Up until now, the group of afterschool workforce staff has been diverse concerning not only the employment conditions but also their qualifications. A high level of pedagogical qualification to master the increasing expectations of families and related politics has become necessary. This level must be guaranteed by a systematical pedagogical training and it requires people who are willing to develop the pedagogical potential of all-day schools by fulfilling an engaged job, which includes emphasizing the daily pedagogical and practical actions and intensifying the effort of being a reflective professional (Kielblock, & Gaiser, 2017).

The organization and administration of leisure programs must be in line with the wishes and requirements of children and parents. High-quality and full pedagogical mentoring is expected, which can only be guaranteed through high-level training (Hofmeister, 2012).

In 2012, a new training program was created in Austria to educate professional pedagogues who would support teaching staff in schools with non-academic activities. Rather than being haphazard and fragmented, the training of leisure pedagogues in Austria is standardized, however not yet compulsory. A framework curriculum had been presented in 2011 as a guideline for the newly implemented training. A consistent and coherent set of expectations about the core competencies that leisure pedagogues need was made official. And so the training began at several University Colleges in Austria (Federal Ministry of Education, 2014).

The training of leisure pedagogues is currently a 2-semester program. The specific feature of this training course is that the participants do not need a university-entrance diploma. An admission procedure ensures that only candidates with the provided basic personal abilities and language skills are accepted.

The students studying to become leisure pedagogues are very diverse. Currently, they are between 18 and 55 years old, and have varied educational backgrounds. Participants of the leisure pedagogue training often have pre-existing skills or training, rather than a university entrance diploma. These skills can be as diverse as carpentry, pottering, soccer, professional musical training and drama.

The training consists of the following modules: self-development, collaboration and communication, law, diversity, leisure pedagogy, sports, music, arts and creativity and, most importantly, observation and practical studies. During the training, the students put what they have learned into practice during 80 hours of fieldwork at all-day schools including 22.5 hours of analysis and reflection. At the end, graduates must complete university courses totaling 60 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) in order to receive a certificate with the title Academic leisure pedagogue.

Due to this training program having been established only recently, it can be concluded that not enough about the outcomes of the training is known and that the knowledge of professional life conditions and challenges of leisure pedagogues in Austria have not yet been investigated thoroughly, as this field has not been the focus of much research. It is not clear if the outcomes of the training fit the requirements of the daily work, which await leisure pedagogues at all-day schools; therefore, further research is needed.

Professional Life of Leisure Pedagogues at Austrian All-Day Schools

At the beginning of the interviews, the leisure pedagogues were asked to describe their everyday professional life. It was found that the graduates are involved with designing a diverse program and organizing a wide range of activities, including guided leisure activities as well as unguided leisure activities.

The diversity of the offer seems to show a large urban/rural disparity. While the three participants from the rural areas mentioned 38 different activities, the three interviewees from the city mentioned only 17 different activities. This striking divergence should be the subject of future analysis.

Leisure pedagogues also have many administrative tasks. These include coordinating homework lists for teachers, keeping attendance lists, ordering meals, providing kitchen services, coordinating appointments with clubs and extracurricular partners, etc., along with refining the integration of the school day with the after-school programs. Based upon these statements, one gets the impression that leisure pedagogues are used as gofers for a variety of tasks. What is not yet currently provided for in the concept of leisure education in all-day schools was explicitly mentioned by 2 interviewees, namely the fact that leisure pedagogues are also used as learning aids.

Regarding the professional experience of the interviewees, they were asked about factors that promote their work and factors that hinder them.

The two most important pillars of all-day schools are: having enough qualified personnel and the appropriate infrastructure and space. Leisure pedagogues, however, are responsible for up to 25 students at the same time. This is an unbearable challenge, which was confirmed by all six interviewees. The goal of fostering innate talents and proclivities is challenging in groups of 25 students. Individual support and special needs require these groups to be much smaller.

The fact that 4 different employers (nation, federal state, community and private organizations) are involved in the employment process leads to an unclear distribution of duties and responsibilities. Additionally, leisure professionals at schools do not know whom to ask or where to go with their needs and ideas. High expectations from different vested interests (stakeholders) make the professional lives of leisure pedagogues challenging. These conflicting interests lead to areas of conflict and the leisure pedagogues are torn with regards to their activities and loyalties.

According to the participants of the interview, the salary is okay but the number of working hours is low. Leisure professionals start work at about 12 and finish their work at

about 5pm, which means they usually work no more than 25 hours per week and earn no income during holidays. So in reality, this is a part time job.

The school system seeks well-educated and skilled personnel to organize and arrange extracurricular activities. The children need leisure time to interact with friends and to recreate. The parents want their children to improve their marks. The teachers want the children to do their homework and learn for tests with the support of leisure pedagogues. And the leisure pedagogues are supposed to develop the students' non-academic skills, however leisure time requires voluntariness and spontaneity. So the job encompasses coordinating different agendas (which are sometimes ambivalent) as well as managing free time.

Yet, what the interview participants have in common is the joy of working with students. It is important to them, however, that they take on the role of leisure pedagogues, where cognitive learning is less important than the development of social skills and informal, voluntary learning. In one interview partner's case, school criticism is unmistakable, but so is the desire to improve the concept of school:

"... and I like to work with children, it seems to be fun. It's leisure time. That means you can work more dynamically, but you're not forced to implement any structure that's given from the outside, but you're convinced that it doesn't make any sense at all. So there was a bit of school criticism, but don't get me wrong. I don't think the concept of school is wrong. So school in ancient Greece was the leisure, which means the distance to think. That's a brilliant concept, actually. One would have to implement it in the sense of the original concept, then we would be on the right track."

The interview partners see their profession as an important task for society and are aware of their responsibility and their roles as pioneers in this field of education.

Regarding the training, the interviewees criticized the one-year program as extremely exhausting, nevertheless, the interviewed graduates were generally satisfied with its quality. They all agreed that this training should be compulsory. One interviewee explicitly asked for more communication and conflict management training to more easily manage the challenges of the job.

The final focus was on development scenarios and potential for the future. The interview partners see that clarification of their role in society and amongst people, who interact with all-day schools, as a must. The lack of tradition and the rapid implementation of the all-day schooling system have created many unanswered questions even among those, who work in all-day schools.

One interviewee also mentioned that a better dovetailing between school and extracurricular content, as well as a better organizational approach are necessary. Collaboration in all-day schools was, in general, an important issue in the interviews.

The fact that the training was perceived as enriching and that the interviewees feel more self-confident in their professional lives makes clear the need for a compulsory training for the pedagogically-active personnel in the all-day school system.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based upon the feedback from interviewed graduates, an extended training is now being offered at the University College of Teacher Education in Styria and so, for future stu-

dents—at least for those in service—the same amount of hours will be divided over 3 semesters.

Motivation and engagement as well as enthusiasm and a pedagogical emphasis, where the child is the key focus, are premises for people working at all-day schools. Without a doubt, infrastructure, education policy, socio-cultural lineups, salary law, employment rate and other factors are important for the staff at schools. But there is one more indispensable condition and this is a basic understanding of what are called a pedagogical unity of action and a learning organization. The school must not be separated into two parts: one that is responsible for the idea of free time and self-ruling and the other responsible for the time with strong structure and academic focus. A lack of dovetailing of curricular and extra-curricular areas leads to divergences, dichotomies and irreparable separations, which undermine a harmonious collective concept in all-day schools. The right mixture of different professions, inclusion of talents and skills of all people and the pooling of burdensome and satisfying activities are the components of a secret recipe for convincing collegial work, which requires designated cooperation time for the whole team. The goal is a dialogue about the divided basic understanding of how to deal with the students' proposals and quality. All-day schools require concrete goals, jointly developed tasks and objectives, plus the security of continuous communication and cooperation between school and organizations that employ leisure pedagogues. In the name of the leisure pedagogues, even more integration into all-day school life must be demanded. This would also create the opportunity to turn a part-time job into a full-time job. What more does it take to give the representatives of extended education the esteem and recognition needed to make them important members of Austria's all-day schools?

From the graduates' point of view, this role needs clarification in society and among the people who interact with the school. For this reason, a survey has been created—based on the findings of this study—with the aim of gaining a representative sample concerning the daily professional life of leisure pedagogues in Styria. This involves identifying items to facilitate understanding of the areas of conflict caused by the ambivalent relationship between leisure education and school, the conflict-riddled relationship between leisure pedagogues and their employers and, finally, to understand how to further improve the training of leisure pedagogues.

In time, the results will lead to a better understanding of the needs of leisure pedagogues and to improving the education in all-day schools in Austria.

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