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Growing a method for empowerment with applied theatre

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ABSTRACT

The article describes how Applied Theatre in creative workshops for persons with learning disabilities came to facilitate the development of a method for promoting self-determination through actualisation of empowerment. The study explores the lived experiences of self-determination in residents living in group homes, through co-creative processes of method development. The presented experiences are bi-findings to the original intent, resulting from an occurring process when urged to interview the institutionalised bearer of everyday oppression—The House—by using role-play. This activity converted into a game, which when analysed, shed light upon fundamental elements underpinning a method for promoting self-determination.

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Learning disability;
self-determination;
empowerment;
group-home; action
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Points of interest

- Self-determination is a human right, which allows all to make own decisions and live in line with own taste.
- Persons with learning disabilities in group homes often experience low self-determination. In the study the participant's tended to speak about the group-home as if the House itself was alive, and had power to decide over the residents.
- We used roleplay to interview the House and co-created a game to enhance empowerment. The game contributed in changing the participant's attitudes, from holding back to standing up for oneself.
- Working with theatre provided possibilities to experiment on alternative forms of action. Since we were just playing, the participants could allow themselves more. They could take lead of their own processes, and develop their own path at their own pace.
- Such creative group-work can thereby be a method to promote self-determination for persons with learning disabilities.

Introduction

Persons with learning disabilities have the same right to decide within their own lives as everyone else. The right to self-determination is perceived as a crucial principle from the 1948 Human Rights Declaration, by ensuring basic freedom and human dignity (Skarstad 2018). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) from 2006 makes a further consolidation to this right, by emphasising the principle of non-discrimination from human rights based on disabilities. This entitles persons with learning disabilities to receive customised help and facilitation in order to enhance their own ability to be self-determined (Skarstad 2018). The political intentions of Norway follow up on this, by ratifying and implementing the convention in 2007. However, research gives relatively unambiguous claims that self-determination is not realised for persons with learning disabilities in accordance with their rights whether in Norway or elsewhere (Gjermestad et al. 2017; Murphy and Bantry-White 2021; Löve, Traustadóttir, and Rice 2018; Kittelsaa 2019).

When searching to explore the lived experience of self-determination for persons with learning disabilities living in group homes, I found that the participants gave a description of their own lives that correlated with Goffman's (1968) concept of total institutions where the mere decisions of everyday lives are controlled by the staff at a system level (Guddingsmo 2019). Institutions are described as destructive towards autonomous living, by conserving imbalanced power relations and creating a severe dependency on staff (Goffman 1968). The same dependency was prominent in the participants' descriptions, by their definition of their own self-determination as decisions they were allowed to make (Guddingsmo 2019). Even more, in the participants' form of speech, the power was often placed on the building itself: The House (Guddingsmo 2019). As in being an independent organism, the House was described to control their access to information, plans, provision of help, restrictions and permissions. Being faceless, the House's power kept its residents in a disempowered position with its lack of visible possibilities for self-involvement. The participants described modulating their wills and needs to encompass the given framework, resignating towards expressing their own will or having dreams and wishes (Guddingsmo 2019).

This pinpoints a need for change to happen in terms of the realisation of self-determination for persons with learning disabilities. The systems sets boundaries that regulate and limit everyday life in such comprehensive ways that the residents become dedicated to a disempowered position, a situation conserved by a tendency of low expectations and acceptance of diverse living conditions among the residents (Guddingsmo 2019, 2020). This underlines a need to develop methods to help promote empowerment for this group.

The main aim of this article is to describe how the use of applied theatre became to create such a method for facilitating the emergence of empowerment, in creative workshops with five participants with learning disabilities.

The creative workshops were originally established as an arena for experimenting on improved methods for research participation by using creative tools. Emphasising the participants' own agenda, the workshops evolved to become an empowerment-group. The workshops further became an arena for Applied Theatre when we decided to have a fictional interview with the House using roleplay. The exercise evolved, and sometime throughout the process, we realised we were co-creating a method to increase empowerment.

It is known that applying theatre can contribute in democratising research for marginalised groups (Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2017), and side-effects from these types of work are common (Shah 2006). In the underlining study, interesting knowledge arose from the crossover between the creative attitudes of Applied Theatre and the contrasting institutionalised perspectives from the participants' everyday lives. The appliance of theatre led to discoveries about the mere concept of self-determination. Simultaneously, it helped to provide knowledge both of the processes that can help promote increased self-determination for persons with learning disabilities—as well as a description of the basic attitudes that underpin the processes of theatrical work underlining these processes. Such is the article intended to offer knowledge contributions both to the field of social work and to applied theatre by describing and analysing the developed method by exploring the problem definition:

- How can Applied Theatre contribute to the realisation of self-determination for persons with learning disabilities?

Background

Applied theatre

Nicholson (2005) makes an overall description of Applied Theatre as 'forms of dramatic activity that primarily exist outside conventional mainstream theatre institutions, and which are specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities and societies' (p.2). The tradition frequently represents a discursive practice, where theatre is considered a catalyst for creating change in the face of social and political challenges (Nicholson 2005; O'Connor and O'Connor 2009). Thereby, the work is based on a basic assumption that theatre possesses transformative properties, both at an individual and societal level (Neelands and Goode 2000; Boal and Jackson 2002). The practices are often motivated by the desire to make positive changes (Nicholson 2005). Implicit to the tradition is the concept that theatre does not exclusively belong to artists but to ordinary people involved in making theatre through their active participation (O'Connor and O'Connor 2009). 'Everybody acts. Everyone is an actor' (Boal and Jackson 2002, 15).

According to Nicholson (2005), the field is influenced by two strands of pedagogy: Paulo Freire's 'Pedagogy of the oppressed' and European models of progressive education. Both traditions place the learner at the center of the pedagogic process and perceive the person as an active creator of own knowledge through practical exploration and emphasised dialogue (Shyman 2011; Nicholson 2005). The stance indicates that the tradition belongs within a pragmatic and emancipatory paradigm, which makes it applicable to implement applied theatre as an approach within action research, where knowledge is developed through joint exploration directed towards improving an imperfect world towards what occurs to be right to the project participants (Laursen 2014). Still, the theatre's potential as a research method is relatively unexplored (Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2017).

The practices represent a breakout from traditional Western theatre conventions (O'Connor and O'Connor 2009). They are presented as interdisciplinary and hybrid to each other (Nicholson 2005), representing an overall eclectic paradigm for artwork where former distinctions between process and product, actor and audience as well as stage and outside world are intertwined (O'Connor and O'Connor 2009).

The assumption of the transformative properties of Applied Theatre is tied to active participation. Within its most interactive forms, as in Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed', actors and spectators can 'coincide in the same person' (Boal 1995, 19), in the spectator, who operates in both the spaces of stage and the audience with the ability to move in and out of the play, both acting and observing (Boal and Jackson 2002). The transformative properties of theatre is also based on the offer of a potential space, which allows for communicating and playing out actions within an embodied, physical space where what happens is pretended—which makes it a safe space for experimenting and risk-taking. This improves the possibilities for reflection, both on, through and within the action/interaction by enabling the observation of oneself and others in action (Boal and Jackson 2002). Including the bodily experience, reflection through theatre expands the possibilities for persons with learning disabilities as the ability to communicate via bodily expressions makes one become less dependent on verbal language and cognition (Tofteng and Husted 2011).

The use of applied theatre to improve the situation for marginalised community groups is a well-known and widely explored field. Among the most distinguished approaches is Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed', where theatre is considered suitable to facilitate empowerment processes in oppressed groups. Within this emancipatory orientation, theatre is used to break the culture of silence by helping participants become aware of occurring oppression in their society (Boal 1985). Furthermore, the experiences are processed in a forward-looking way by working together through dialogue to find improved action strategies in face of oppression, both to

relationships in the surroundings (Boal 1985) and ‘the cop in the head’—the individual’s own internal suppressor (Boal 1995). Boal’s ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ is inspired by Freire’s concurrent ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ (Nicholson 2005). Among others, the theories are based upon a similar understanding of the concept of empowerment as a process that needs to occur bottom-up, depending on a process where the oppressed finds power to liberate themselves—in their own premises—becoming the protagonists of own actions.

However, the field has recently been characterised by a critical debate concerning the presumed transformational properties of Applied Theatre. This self-criticism is based on a fairly naive reliance on the transformative properties of theatre involvement, which can lead to a tendency of making too definite conclusions about cause and effect, and further to instrumentalist use of the methods (Balfour and Freebody 2018). Reference is made to the fact that Applied Theatre may also end up with having a neoliberalist turn of perspectives, where the Theatre of the Oppressed becomes Theatre of the Oppressors (Hamel 2013; Erel, Reynolds, and Kaptani 2017). Thereby, a successful application of Applied Theatre to promote empowerment can be seen to require safeguarding of central democratic principles within the working process to secure that the power of making definitions is located upon those of the participants representing the oppressed.

Group home living as a person with a learning disability

I have named the workshop participants Emma, Jonas, Tarjei, Eirin and Silje. They have both cognitive and physical disabilities, which triggers a need for help from the environment to live full, active, normal adult lives. Some matters are practical, such as cleaning, cooking and transport, others more intangible and resolved by guidance, training and access to information. However, all types of help play crucial parts in the customised facilitation needed to ensure their rightful realisation of self-determination in order to make their own decisions and have a life in accordance with their own will and preferences. The same need for assistance, however, participates in their described lack of self-determination, especially due to institutionalisation and having status as a person with a learning disability.

As increasingly common in Norway, the provision of help is tied to their living arrangement in group home residences consisting of cluster-organised, publicly owned apartments connected to a staff office. Being placed in ‘care-ghettoes’ with massive co-localisation of care services, the group homes often appear as segregated from rest of the community by architecture and demography. This entails a position of ringside living for the residents, in an environment more severely characterised by professional care than what is usual for the rest of society. The faceless power of the participants’

conception of 'The House', underlines the institutional characteristics of the group homes, which contrary to ideals and good intentions, tend to become what Morris (2004) describes as 'a disempowering framework'. Studies describe it to be hard for residents in group homes to perform self-determination (Morris 2004; Gjermestad et al. 2017; Murphy and Bantry-White 2021). In my own findings, system considerations seem to override individual focus in the providence of help (Guddingsmo 2019). In addition, the structure builds upon a logic where the staff functions as gatekeepers, with power to both inhibit and prohibit the residents' possibilities of being self-determined based on an assumption of their competence (Guddingsmo 2020).

Although being the hallmark of all kinds of institutions (Goffman 1968), the situation seems amplified for residents with learning disabilities. Emma, Tarjei, Jonas, Eirin and Silje never uses the term to describe themselves. However, one can expect some of their everyday challenges to stem from being considered within the stigmatising framework by society. Studies convey that persons with learning disabilities strive to be considered as adults by staff or relatives (Capri and Swartz 2018; Gjermestad et al. 2017; Kittelsaa and Kermit 2015). They are always on the verge of having all their attitudes and actions explained as a result of their disability (Kittelsaa 2011), and they experience being underestimated and overprotected (Callus et al. 2019). Thereby is also a tendency towards self-stigma, where persons with learning disabilities adapt to the negative characteristics (Sheehan and Ali 2016) and struggle towards living up to unreachable demands and standards from the society, rather than protesting and claiming their rights (Guddingsmo 2020).

Self-determination and empowerment

The relational concept of self-determination used by CRPD is influenced by a feminist perspective, defining disability as a natural variation among the human herd within an overarching paradigm of interdependency (Skarstad 2018). It thereby addresses the right to receive proper facilitation to ensure the ability to make one's own choices and have a life in accordance with one's own will and preferences in line with the rest of society (Skarstad 2019). This understanding makes self-determination for people with disabilities possible in new ways by offering the option of becoming a strengthened determinant towards one's own life through supportive relations (Skarstad 2018). The descriptions from the group homes, however, refer to issues within the actual helping relations in terms of unequal distribution and paternalism that materialises both in a dependency on permissions and an absence of help towards realising their own preferences (Guddingsmo 2020).

Wehmeyer (2007) points out a need for education in order for people with learning disabilities to become self-reliant adults. He defines

self-determination as a skill, possible to train and develop and synonymous with the concept of empowerment, including processes where individuals find power through developing an understanding of their own will in interactions with the environment (Wehmeyer 2005). Within the emancipatory tradition, empowerment can be defined to describe a process where individuals or groups mobilise their own strength to liberate themselves from a situation of powerlessness (Askheim, Starrin, and Heyerdahl 2007). The pedagogue Paulo Freire has had major impact on the understanding of the term through his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Askheim, Starrin, and Heyerdahl 2007), which focuses on the necessity of oppressed persons to become aware of their own oppression, as this is needed to regain human dignity, liberate oneself from oppression and influence history as a changing subject (Freire 2003). Thereby, empowerment is a process that needs to happen bottom-up, where ownership and the power to make definitions is placed upon the oppressed themselves. According to Freire (2003), the only suitable method for facilitating the actualisation of empowerment is through the establishment of a genuine dialogue based on a trust in the ability for reasoning in its participants, where the main purpose is the rise of cultural awareness towards a democratic cultural revolution.

Methods

The article is based on experiences from five group-based creative workshops conducted during the spring of 2017. The workshops were part of a study named Perspectives on Self-determination, which is a qualitative, exploratory study with a social research approach. The study explores the lived experience of persons with learning disabilities living in group homes, while developing improved research methods. The workshops were established to explore whether research participants with learning disabilities could profit as research participants by making use of creative tools in a group context.

The workshops had five participants and two researchers. The participants, 2 males and 3 females aged between 25–45, were considered experts at the research topic by living in group homes and having both cognitive and physical disabilities. They were recruited through staff in their group homes, who emphasised suitability and motivation for participating in workshops when selecting them. The researchers were me, a drama pedagogue and PhD student and Oddbjørn, my co-supervisor who is a skilled action researcher and former practice field worker. Our roles were distributed to me being the leading facilitator, controlling the work process and manifesting the role of game-joker. Oddbjørn functioned as co-researcher and sidekick, processing all the group-conversations outside of the theatre games.

The workshop meetings took place in a room at the university, with an empty wooden floor, some chairs and a table to gather around. The

workshops can be framed as art-based research by its basic idea of making a creative space where the participants may take liberties towards the world as they otherwise experience it (Barone and Eisner 2006). They further operate within the tradition of emancipatory action research. This implies that those who participate must be active premise-vendors in the research setting (Walmsley and Johnson 2003), further involving a need for an openness considering the study design and research approach. The concept of the workshops was thereby developed in an ongoing process, where we worked to emphasise the participants' perspective, making choices based on what seemed important and right for the participants (Nind 2014).

We experienced, however, that the participants gave few direct addresses of their initiatives. Thereby, we needed to find other ways to encompass the process to their perspective. The workshops were reviewed in between the meetings, built upon systematic processes based on Theoretical sampling (Charmaz 2014) adapted to a cyclical spiral model based on ever-recurrent interaction between action, reflection and planning (Coghlan and Brannick 2010). Recordings were analysed, to create a basis for a tentative plan for the next meeting—a map consisted of multiple paths. The concept of the workshops further became to materialise itself based on what emerged in the moment in the interactions between the participants' initiatives, Oddbjørn's questions and my own drama facilitator's toolbox of work methods and games.

The reviews further offered the ability to integrate the modest perspectives, initiatives and preferences that were overseen by us researchers at the time they appeared. Two such aspects became crucially important in giving direction to the study. The review of the first workshop meeting disclosed that the participants had their own agenda for attending. They used the workshop meeting to work on self-determination as a theme and to improve their own empowerment. This made the workshops become an empowerment group where we worked on exploring and challenging experiences and conceptions related to the theme of self-determination. The second point was that we became aware of the participants' use of language, when addressing the House when being in need for permission.

Developing a method

Emma: 'Then I need to ask the House, first', Oddbjørn: 'You need to ask the House first?' Emma: 'Yes'. Me: 'Can the House say no, then?' Emma: 'Yes. Sometimes it does'. Oddbjørn (laughs): 'It's a bit odd, then, can the House say no'? (Everyone laughs.)

The workshops became an arena for applied theatre when we decided to interview the House by using roleplay. To assist in giving immediate answers and reduce anxiety, the participants were equipped with two laminated signs: A green sign saying YES, and a red sign saying NO. These were used

when answering on behalf of the House. The fictional conversation evolved into becoming a game, that continued to develop until becoming the method presented in this article.

I facilitated the process with a traditional approach as a drama-pedagogue by combining the way of working with the focus of the group (Neelands and Goode 2000). We started out inspired by existing conventions or games, and further encompassed the method in a joint process while adapting to each moment and eventually creating our own games and work forms. Instead of having strict rules for the games made beforehand, we accommodated the work forms towards how the participants involved themselves in the games. I stressed giving high efforts towards any initiative that would come from the participants, considering both directly expressed initiatives, modest perspectives from the in-between analyses and modes and reactions of the group in the specific moment. I made use of both cognitive and embodied experiences as the facilitator, leaving the failures behind and following the leads from what the participants seemed to find interesting or termed as fun.

Analysis

The game evolved through three phases, named “*Asking the House for permission*”, “*Arguing on behalf of each other*” and “*Practicing how to put the foot down*”, and defined by how we worked at each specific time. Their presentation is based on the logic of action research, where the ‘truth’ is to be found embedded within the action itself (Laursen 2014) and should be ‘judged by its consequences’ (Barone and Eisner 2006, 102). The presentation is thereby focusing upon describing what happened in the research setting, based on the clearly characterised chronological phases that appeared to crystallize during the process. To deepen the knowledge of each phase, the material has undergone additional analyses. Inspired by Grounded Theory, these consisted of rereading, coding and simple categorising (Charmaz 2014) and are presented by the characteristic core points of each phase. The in-depth analyses continue through the discussion section, where the understanding is further developed through abductive processes where theory and empirical data alternately affect the understanding of each other (Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

Phase 1: Asking the house for permission

We started out with the intention of having a fictional interview with the House, but the roleplay situation evolved to be some sort of game within its first minutes. We as researchers played the protagonist participants, who came to ask the House about permission. The participants played the

antagonist Resident, who answered by holding up the signs with YES or NO based on what they believed would be the most probable response in everyday life. Afterwards, we reflected on the given answer.

Phase 1 can be further divided into two phases, a) and b). In phase a) we started out by asking the participants usual questions. These were permissions the participants had told us in focus conversations and brainstorm that they needed to get, for instance going to the store or visiting their mom. The core point within this phase is the participants' experience of the naturality in the need for asking questions about these things, and the staffs' right to grant them consent or not.

In phase b) we started challenging the perspective by asking questions that had not been mentioned by the participants but grounded in our research curiosity. Among others, we tested what would be the response to questions about spending money on shopping, doing the cleaning on another day than scheduled or asking about changing one's own primary contact from the staff.

The core points within this phase are connected to why these questions were not asked in everyday life. Since the participants were sure what the answer would be ('plain no!'), they experienced no need to ask these questions in real life. The participants expressed finding some of the situations both thrilling and absurd, when especially Oddbjørn dared to ask questions experienced as borderline. We experienced quite a few moments of laughter during this phase.

Phase 2: Arguing on behalf of each other

It came to a point where the participants felt like trying out asking questions themselves. The roles switched: The participants played themselves as residents, while we researchers took the signs to gestalt the House (with some additional help from the participants to ensure realistic answers). The participants tried out asking questions they had never or seldom asked in everyday life. Then the participant was asked if he/she appealed to the given answer. If not, the participants helped each other out arguing to get the desired answer, most often about making the House to switch the sheets from NO to YES.

The first core point of this phase is connected to the striking humbleness of the participants' expectations. In the beginning, they asked questions about quite simple things in everyday life, like going to the store. Gradually the questions evolved, from everyday activities that would trigger some need for increased resources or customisations from the staff, to involve dreams of having regular, non-institutionalised holidays.

The second core point is connected to how the participants described their disagreement as fairly communicated in the everyday setting. They enjoyed telling the House NO when asked if they agreed with the answer,

but they found it hard to argue for themselves in the game. However, the participants said it felt good arguing on behalf of each other and could appear quite persistent when backing someone else.

Phase 3: Practicing how to put one's foot down

In phase 3, we had reached the point where we were able to pursue the desire from one of the participants: 'I need to practice how to put my foot down'. We put the signs away and started out practicing how to find new strategies for action to improve one's own agency by using Forum Theatre. I approached the function as Joker, while the participant in question started out as protagonist. Afterwards, all of us switched off playing both the protagonist resident and the antagonist staff member.

According to the framework of Forum Theatre, we played out a situation from everyday life where the main character of the situation experienced oppression (Boal 1985). Through discussions, mutual reflections and experimentations on stage, we worked on developing new action strategies to accommodate their challenges in everyday life (Boal 1985). All the situations we played out did unfold in the resident setting, in the interactions between a single resident and members of the staff. The first situation was about getting ahold of busy staff members by managing to make contact during the daily medication visit to communicate decisions and desires. Later, we worked on how to insist on being taken seriously when communicating disagreements on how services were provided in the everyday setting.

The core point of Phase 3 is connected to a change of perspective from the previous phases. The focus of the game has shifted, from trying out possibilities for having a will to searching for strategies to determine an outcome that correlates with their own desires. Simultaneously, the antagonist role has switched from being represented by the structural House to singular individuals representing the staff.

Discussion

The growth dimension

There is a severe difference between asking for permission and practicing how to put one's foot down. In phase 1, the staff's right to give permission is seen as given, in phase 3 one has adopted a boundary-setting attitude towards the surroundings. In this way, we can spot a change in the attitude towards the perception of participants' own rights through the developmental phases of the game. In phase 1, it is obvious that others decide, but in phase 3, it is obvious that oneself has the right to determine. The locus of control changes from being placed on others to belonging to the

participants' themselves. The perspective moves from taking for granted that others decide to being aware of one's own agency.

The span can be described in light of Freirès theories on conscientisation. The concept describes the change of perspective in the oppressed person in a process of emerging empowerment, as the rising awareness that occurs when oppressed people become aware of the oppression itself and his/her own relation to the oppressor—the mere foundation of being able to oppose against an unwanted situation (Freire 2003; Freire, Freire, and Macedo 1998). Simplified, conscientisation can be described as a growth process from naïve to critical consciousness. In the naïve position, the oppression is perceived as magical and naturally given, and the person puts up with mostly anything without questioning (Freire 2003). This is the case within phase 1, where the participants take the House's authority for granted, never questioning its legitimacy for giving or upholding permissions. This perception makes it impossible to change one's own situation or even to oppose it. Instead, one accepts the role as submissive towards the oppressor (Freire 2003).

As Emma expresses it, when challenged by Oddbjørn who (a bit baffled) asked her, "What on earth she should do" to get ahold of the ability to spend her own money: "Nag about it for the rest of my life!". Her perceived possibilities for action only exist within boundaries made by others, which only can leave her relegated to an infinite nagging position where the main strategy becomes adaption to the perceived given framework. The solution for own will within phase 1, is thereby most often resignation within a fixed perspective of impossibility.

The perspective has dramatically changed when reaching phase 3. *Practicing how to put onès foot down* indicates implicitly how oneself is the person to control the situation. The resident no longer sees the need to ask for permission. One no longer considers the given answers as a truth but treats the situations as holders of multiple truths and oneself in position of having one's own meanings and will. This correlates with the process of conscientisation's move to a more critical consciousness, which involves being aware of the unfairness of a situation and realising the occurrence of oppression. The oppressed consider themselves as opposed to the oppressor and register the oppressor's antagonistic position (Freire 2003). One further becomes aware of the split between nature and culture and recognises the oppression as a construction forced by the oppressor (Freire 2003). This is the very premise for the occurrence of change where the persons themselves regain the power of their own life—towards empowerment (Freire 2003).

This change of perspective reveals the power of the developed method as inhibiting the possibility to change the perspective from a notion of hopelessness to imagining possibilities, and from perceiving the House as a given power factor in existence to understand it as a constructed system populated by employees to whom it may be possible to address, oppose and demand upon.

The process dimension

As a theatre-practitioner, I presumed the problematic stories that unfolded were obviously to be approached with Forum Theatre early in the process. We tried using Forum Theatre during phase 1, but it did not work out. We targeted a problematic situation described by Emma, who continually experienced coming home from work finding delicate pieces of underwear in the tumble dryer despite perpetually trying to communicate to the staff that she wanted to take care of her own laundry. However, our attempt to play out alternative strategies stranded because despite the fact that Emma absolutely felt the agony, she did not realise an obvious problem that triggered the unwanted situation: The staff did something they were not allowed to when accessing the apartment without her permission.

In retrospect, it seems as if the challenge of making use of Forum Theatre in phase 1 could stem from a lack of awareness in the participants, which held them back from seeing through the full problem of the situation. In Freirès terms, one could state that the group was not ready for Forum Theatre because they were still not realising the antagonist position of the staff. Thereby, the problems with working on alternative strategies for action could stem from a lack of clear address for an opposition that either way did not seem to be just.

According to Neelands and Goode (2000), conventions cannot become useful resources if there is no meaningful connection to the participants' here and now reflection. Chosen methods foremost become powerful from being appropriate to the specific moment (Neelands and Goode 2000). It is crucial that the facilitator lets the focus emerge through the participants' own experience when given the opportunity to impact their own course of work (Neelands and Goode 2000). It is further an important principle in Forum Theatre that no one should be forced into other people's ideas or be challenged to do something they do not want (Boal and Jackson 2002). Forum Theatre shall not be preachy, dogmatic or seek to manipulate those who participate in any direction determined by anyone but the participants themselves (Boal and Jackson 2002). According to Boal and Jackson (2002), involvement in Forum Theatre does not necessarily imply a liberating function for the participants, but at its best, it helps stimulate the liberating process by offering the opportunity of becoming an actor.

A holding back from rigid focus and forced intentions is important to ensure the participants' artistic power (Neelands and Goode 2000), which further helps realise the process of empowerment. In Freire's (Freire, Lie, and Berkaak 2003) terms, it is impossible to become liberated on others' premises. Empowerment is thereby a process that needs to happen 'bottom-up' and only to be facilitated through dialogic approaches that anticipate the oppressed person's own ability of defining their own situation and making reflections (Freire, Lie, and Berkaak

2003). Thereby, it is central for any empowerment-oriented method to offer the oppressed person an actual opportunity of becoming the active subject to control their own process, instead of being an object for others to change.

In the workshops, we went back to using the notes asking for permission, towards a process that gradually evolved towards phase 2 when the participants expressed the curiosity of asking the House their own questions. Further on, our method was created by relating to each present moment in a process of adjustment between the method and the group's focus at any given time. When the perspective of the group changed, the way of working changed as well. In this way, the method grew along with the participants' growth of awareness being based on mutual processes of joint exploration. In this way, the method was created through interactive processes where the material can be seen to be co-created through dialogue.

The form of work may have contributed to ensure the participants' possibility of becoming premise-vendors to the process as well as opening the possibility of retaining the control of their own process of growth. The experience helps to emphasise the importance of respecting the participants' need to work at their own pace in order to move through all phases necessary for them to undergo. In the same way, it appears crucial to have open objectives with the intention of counteracting the enforcement of well-intentioned ideas of 'liberation'. Thereby, it seems important to emphasise how the method described in this article originated in a process based on a different purpose (collecting data for a research project), but the form of work simultaneously helped to actualise empowerment for participants by providing space and tools for exploration within a distinctive framework.

The play dimension

Tarjei strikes those who meet him as a reflected person. And he speaks well. In the research project, he contributed by offering the data material with a distinctive depth, and in the workshops, he often made use of his gifts of speech to verbalise other participants' experiences when they came up short. He could thereby be expected to carry a unique competence of advocating for the others, by speaking up and putting words to critical thoughts and protests in the group. However, as for all the other participants, in the early phases of the work, most attempts of critical questioning were stranded in subordinating to the oppressive mechanisms of the House.

During phase 1, Tarjei often seemed to find the answers from the House fair; although, he also claimed to be sorry when some of the others could not get their will through. When entering phase 2, he still expressed reluctance towards asking the House his own questions or going into discussions with it. He explained he preferred to keep things realistic, a perspective he also meant should include his dreams. However, at a liminal point within

the transition towards phase 2, I spontaneously became to emphasise play as a concept—launching the focus by expressing: ‘remember, this isn’t for real’. In that very moment, Tarjei immediately dropped away from his reluctant position. He suddenly gave a little laughter and entered the activity with a playful and competitive attitude. Throughout the workshops, he continued to emphasise how the argumentative parts of what is played out were not representative of his actions in everyday life. When entering play, however, Tarjei appeared to be the best to give arguments: creative, obstinate and courageous on others’ behalf, eager to prevent someone else from giving up their wills and dreams when acting within the pretended roleplay.

The participants later on described experiencing a difference between the workshops and everyday life, where the workshops gave opportunity for acting out behaviours they never allowed themselves elsewhere. The workshops were described as offering an improved room for expression based on the circumstance that what happened there was not real, so no one would get sad or offended despite their protests, argumentation or ‘acting difficult’. The experience can be perceived in light of Boal’s (1995) concept of the aesthetic space, which describes the therapeutic functions of drama work to be embedded in its extended possibilities for action by offering a plasticity greater than everyday life. When playing, there is no longer a need to comply with any laws of reality. Thereby the element of play seems to offer extended possibilities for examining fully acting out as a human, made possible by its inhibited absence of usual obstacles and restrictions.

In our case, we can see that the fictional room for play obtains extended possibilities for critical awareness. According to the theory of conscientisation, Tarjei seems to have a more critical attitude when entering play than in everyday life. He moves from the defense of comprising to the complete support of his co-participants’ protest within a few seconds. At the same time, he continues making it clear that it will be futile to try to protest in such a way in reality. Relating to his everyday possibilities, one can perceive Tarjei’s arguments for keeping it realistic to be sensible. At the same time, his actions when entering play might suggest that he also carries some personal values that cannot be realised within the experienced limitations of everyday life.

According to Boal (1995), the Aesthetic Space is not merely a physical stage but rather a condition in which to involve and interact in dramatic play (Boal 1995). The aesthetic space contains a plasticity that offers greater possibilities than everyday life, where what happens is real and fictious at the same time (Boal 1995). Playing opens possibilities for the participants to protest precisely because the situations are not happening for real. At the same time, one has suddenly protested for real anyway since the protest is experienced while being lived out within embodied space. In this way, drama work does not just offer extended possibilities for perception, but

perception in itself changes from entering play through trading the reflection to an outplayed praxis within the here and now situation (Neelands and Goode 2000).

Confronting the institution

Whether acting or spectating, theatre inhibits possibilities of changing the participants' conception of the outplayed property (Neelands and Goode 2000). Theatre offers the ability to act out alternative images to one's own understanding, becoming mirrors to reflect upon, suitable for both describing the current situation and offering the ability to alternative possibilities that otherwise would seem unavailable (Boal and Jackson 2006). The described method may have offered such a mirror for the participants in the workshops. In the beginning, the House is perceived as an immovable structure. It is an institution that represents an unclear system to whom the participants as residents seem to find few opportunities to somehow intervene with or promote changes upon. The unequal power relations between them and the staff is seen as definite. They experience a lack of control where they have become resigned towards their own situation, claiming there is no point in taking initiatives, protesting or having dreams and wishes.

However, by starting out asking The House some questions, we seem to have done as the first protagonist—Thesps, when taking his leap out of the choir to become the first protagonist. In Boal and Jackson (2006) anecdotal description, Thesps is also the first to question the establishment's perspective of unity—and by that theatre was born. By asking the House questions, we start out challenging what earlier was perceived as a given. We become aware that the House does not have unambiguous answers. We enter into discussions with it, and in the end, we confront it—whereas either the choir or the House no longer can be perceived as the holder of a singular, definite truth. The participants step out of the institutionalised perspective, and they antagonise the institution itself. From being a given, the institution fragmentates and becomes possible to oppose, impose and change by their own agency. And thereby the method participates in changing the relation between the participants and the world.

The presentation in this article is based on selected parts of the material that can best help shed light on the developed method as an empowerment strategy. However, the evolvment progressed through facilitation from a multi facet of approaches, each of them to be perceived as separately having their unique impact towards the emerging processes. Phase 1 inhibits the mechanisms of role-reversal, by offering possibilities for perceiving one's own existence and actions from an outsider's perspective (Neelands and Goode 2000). The signs with YES and NO can be perceived as transitional

objects, becoming tools for expressing the perspectives one is not able to (or does not dare to) express directly (Winnicott 1980). Phase 1 b) is characterised by situations of humour and laughter, where Oddbjørn asking borderline questions both inhibits a valve function and participates in gaining insight into their own oppressed situation from the effects of *verfrämderung* triggered by the humorous points as in a liberating catharsis (Fo et al. 1992). In phase 2, the participants enter the roles as protagonists, and the roleplay becomes an arena for testing possibilities for having different perspectives and practicing new behaviours towards self-advocacy. However, the performance of advocacy is still taken care of by a transition through speaking up on behalf of each other. Moving to phase 3 means intentionally progressing to using a convention highly inspired from Boal's (1985) Forum Theatre, experimenting with new traces for action when experiencing oppression through roleplay, discussions, and role-transitions.

However, in light of what is presented in the article, it seems strictly important to perceive the multifacetedness of the approach through the lens of action research. Analysing every angle of the roleplay itself might lead to a misconception of the described method as *the* pathway towards actualisation of empowerment when the nature of its emergence is funded from the mere basis of no such thing as *a* singular truth. Other facets of tools could most possibly have been present, if we had different tool boxes, if they seemed right to the group or were a focus of the participants. In this way, the method becomes a catalysator for change by its allowance for working on whatever is needed by the group and its participants. Thereby, the findings most of all enlighten the need for a method in which the person him/herself is subject to the process and is perceived as an agent towards their own work.

The method does not solve the participants' entire problem of practicing self-determination as residents in group homes. By having disabilities, they find themselves in a doubly difficult position, from being dependent on the help from others to realise themselves. This implies that their realisation of self-determination requires more than individual insight, it also requires encompassment of resources and working methods from a more comprehensive system than what individuals can influence or control through small initiatives in their everyday lives. Empowerment also implies changing the structures (Freire 2003). In this way, one of the shortcomings of the method is that it does not contribute towards bringing the participants' perspectives out to the world through an arts performance—missing the opportunity of allowing the artistic expressions initiate changes at a systems level. At the same time, it would be realistic to consider that the participants' processes would not have come forward unless actually appearing within a sheltered space where there were precisely no consequences for whatever was expressed in the moment.

The emerging change of perspective further participates in enlightening new and important perspectives concerning the situation persons with learning disabilities finds themselves in as human beings: regarding what they need to change and what qualities they want to develop in themselves. This further contributes towards describing more of their everyday challenges, a knowledge that would otherwise have stayed tacit both to themselves and others.

Conclusion

It is tempting to point out the obvious with the presented findings of this article: That involvement in drama and theatrical roleplay seems to have had the exact effects the tradition itself claims it to inhibit. However, it is important to remember how the article is founded on a logic based on opposite premises. The strength of the findings lies precisely in the very basis of the working process: We originally had intended to do something else. Thereby, empowerment became a process that actualised itself; first from joining the group and eventually from working with drama. The findings have an empirical basis, which contributes in illuminating how empowerment constitutes an important aspect in the realisation of self-determination for persons with learning disabilities. It demonstrates how a central point of becoming self-determinant is the discovery of one's own will and beginning to perceive oneself as a reliable person. At the same time, it indicates what type of pedagogy needs to form the basis of educating processes leading to such self-reliance.

The article is based on what emerged from introducing drama work in a workshop for participants with learning disabilities. The method we created, contributed with knowledge that occurred in the contrasting relationship between the attitudes and possibilities of working with drama—and experienced institutionalised everyday life. For participants, the drama work offered a freeing alternative to the paternalism of everyday life. At the same time, the facilitation offered both tools and assistance—help through the relationship with others—which we all are dependent upon in order to exercise self-determination. Persons with learning disabilities, however, are at risk of being stuck in their helping relationships because the disability makes them more dependent upon others to realise themselves and because the environment's attitudes makes them more susceptible to override. This implies that if we are to succeed in promoting self-determination for persons with learning disabilities, their needs must be met with a pedagogic approach where they themselves are allowed to lay the premises, work in a problem-oriented manner and possess the power to make their own definitions. The method can neither be too instrumental, nor focused upon individual adaption to existing systems. If self-determination is the goal, then the knowledge cannot be obeyed—but created.

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