

R

# The professional identity of recreation personnel

Kolbrún Þ. Pálsdóttir

## Abstract

The European qualifications and training of personnel in after-school programs for young school children vary (EFILWC 2006). Iceland mandates no specific requirements other than having some experience with children and having no criminal record. The main aim of this article is to understand how recreation personnel perceive their professional identity and location in the educational sector. Qualitative data from two after-school centres was analysed using the model of social ecology of identity (Wenger 1998). The main findings indicated that the personnel considered it their role to provide physical and emotional care; to support social development of children and provide opportunities for informal learning. Nevertheless, the majority of the personnel held unclear professional identities, and did not perceive themselves as active participants within the educational system. I argue that an alternative pedagogical approach is needed that sees recreation personnel as active participants and members of a shared educational practice within schools.

## Introduction

The qualifications and training of personnel in after-school programs vary across Europe (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EFILWC) 2006). There is a range of job titles used for after-school personnel, for example *child minder*, *after-school service teacher*, *nanny*, *social worker*, and *leisure-time teacher* (EFILWC 2006). In this article, the term *recreation personnel* means unqualified personnel, and *recreation pedagogue* means a person that has finished a tertiary education in recreation pedagogy. There is debate as to whether care for school-age children falls within the same category as early education or if it should be seen as related more to the work of the school; similarly there is debate as to what type of professionals should be employed in after-

school services (Moss 2006). The main aim of this article is to understand how recreation personnel from two after-school centres in Iceland perceive their professional identity and location in the educational sector. The goal is to present findings which, it is hoped, will shed light on the unclear connection between school-age care and the work of the school, and may be of benefit to professionals and policy makers within school-age care and education.

In some countries, such as Iceland, no specific requirements are mandated by the government other than having some experience with children and no criminal record (Youth Act no. 70/2007). A 2006 report about after-school programs in the European Union countries showed that in general there is little investment in such services (EFILWC 2006). Personnel are often underpaid and have poor working condi-

tions. The majority of the personnel in the after-school centres in Reykjavik have not completed tertiary education, although a high percentage of them are university students. Some, for example, are currently pursuing studies for a degree in social studies, pedagogy or teaching (Pálsdóttir 2012). The salary is rather low and the jobs are mostly part-time, which contributes to the difficulties of attracting professionals, such as teachers or pedagogues, into the workforce. Furthermore, in Iceland a profession of recreation pedagogues, as can be found for example in Denmark (Danish: fritidspedagog) and Sweden (Swedish: fritidslærer), has not developed.

*The unclear definition of the work of recreation personnel that work in after-school services for young school children, undermines the formation of a clear professional identity.*

Nevertheless, the municipalities in Reykjavik have made an effort to increase the quality of the services by setting forth a policy specifying their purpose and rules of daily practice. In those documents the centres are defined as a part of the child's leisure time and, as such, areas of free play and places where children can take part in creative activities, under adult supervision (Reykjavik 2006). I have previously discussed the importance of the services for the children (Pálsdóttir 2010; 2012). A city ordinance was issued in 2010 that stated that schools and after-school centres should aim for an integrated work-day for children (Reykjavik 2010). Research has shown that the after-school centres are indeed on the periphery of the educational system and that there is a gap between the practice of the school and the after-school centre (Pálsdóttir 2012). As

a professional sector, recreational pedagogy is, thus, still in its infancy. It will rely on both external conditions, such as public investment and recognition, and internal conditions, such as increased professional knowledge and experience, in order to develop and sustain itself.

## **Professional identity of recreation personnel – Previous research**

For those working in after-school services it has been a challenge to develop a strong professional identity. The main reasons for this are twofold: firstly, a lack of public investment (see for example Cartmel 2007; EFILWC 2006; Pálsdóttir 2012) and secondly, a lack of a clearly defined societal role. Recent international research has shown that there are similarities in the roles that recreation personnel assume in their work with children in after-school centres.

Evidence for lack of public investment is obvious by the same token that in a majority of countries there does not exist a professional body that is responsible for these services. In the few countries where such a professional body exists, a high staff turnover makes it difficult to develop and stick to pedagogical plans (EFILWC 2006). There are undoubtedly many reasons for a high turnover, including, in some cases, low salaries, poor working conditions, work-related stress, and a lack of possibilities for developing one's competence (EFILWC 2006; Højholt 2001; Petrie, Egharevba, Oliver and Poland 2000). Cartmel (2007) reported how after-school leaders in two Australian schools had to fight for the existence of their programs within the schools in which they operated. An analysis of the dialogue between school leaders and after-school leaders showed that the after-school sector was

not being recognized as a valid member within the school community.

Secondly, there are indicators that the work of recreation personnel is poorly defined and that their work is in many cases unstructured, at least from an outsider's perspective. Petrie et al. (2000) found out that personnel in after-school programs in the United Kingdom faced complex and important circumstances of work but were under-paid and that their conditions of employment left much to be desired. Staff members were expected to perform a variety of tasks, including cooperating with the school and the social services, maintaining contact with parents, writing brochures, purchasing and maintaining equipment, and preparing and planning daily activities. This concurs with research from other countries (Cartmel 2007; Foss 2011; Højholt 2001; Haglund 2004; Pálsdóttir 2012). Recreation pedagogues and personnel seem to share a traditional base of providing care and opportunities for play activities. For example, when describing their work, recreation pedagogues in a Danish study (Højholt 2001) emphasized (a) the *social development* of the children, (b) creating a *quality time together* with the children (doing something together/talking together), (c) providing *care*, and (d) encouraging *creativity and free play*. But the professional work of recreation pedagogues, such as assessment of individual or group progress, is often tacit and mainly informal (Andersson 2013), making it difficult to establish an understanding of their work in the outer community.

The unclear definition of the work of recreation personnel that work in after-school services for young school children, undermines the formation of a clear professional identity. This becomes more evident when recreation personnel work in schools alongside teachers, such as in Denmark and

Sweden, where after-school services are integrated in schools. In most countries, formal cooperation between recreation personnel and teachers is limited (EFILWC 2006). However, in Denmark and Sweden cooperation between teachers and recreation pedagogues is quite formalized. In these countries recreation pedagogues administrate and work in the after-school centres, but they also work in schools in the mornings, making it possible to have full-time employment (see for example, Haglund 2004; Stanek 2012). Nordic research indicates that school-directed practices tend to override the traditional goals of the recreation tradition (Calander 2000; Haglund 2004; Stanek 2012). Calander (2000) maintains that in Sweden recreation pedagogues who work in collaboration with teachers in schools soon become "the teacher's assistant." His research confirms that occupational groups with more resources and symbolic power in society tend to dominate groups that have fewer resources. This is in line with international research that shows the marginalisation of these services in the educational sector (Cartmel 2007; Foss 2011; Pálsdóttir 2012; Smith and Barker 2002).

The challenge of bringing after-school care into schools relates not least to cooperation between different professionals and how they take part in creating a professional community that allows a variety of perspectives on children's lives and development (Højholt 2004). The tension between school and leisure-time centres relates to a well-known and ongoing debate about the relationship between education and care that has characterized discussions in early education (Bennett 2003). We have seen that educated recreation pedagogues aspire to provide care and to support the overall development of children, with an emphasis on

social skills. According to Stanek (2012), Danish recreational pedagogues feel that their input is valuable in providing a different way of working with the children during the otherwise structured school-day, specifically regarding children with special needs, or children with emotional or behavioural problems. At the same time, the main challenge they face when working within the school is maintaining the informal nature of their professional identity.

Thus, the role of recreation pedagogues in the educational system is unclear, leading to a weak professional identity, more so in countries where the majority of personnel has no specific qualifications. Previous research indicates that the qualifications of personnel in after-school care vary greatly; their backgrounds, previous experiences and social status affect how they engage in, and identify with, their work (EFILWC 2006). Whether they make a long-term commitment to the practice or are simply transient members for a short period of time, may be seen as influencing the level of their membership in the professional community and their identification with the work.

## Theoretical framework

This research uses Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practices to explore the professional identity of the recreation personnel that participated in the study. Unlike previous Nordic research that has focused more on pedagogy (see Haglund 2004; Stanek 2012) or on organisational development (see Torstenson-Ed and Johansson 2000), the current study applied Wenger's analytical model to examine how various workplace participants identify at different levels, professionally, with the community of practice. Learning within the workplace is a situated activity that involves staff members engaging

in practices and exchanging ideas, experiences, tools and histories, so that the activity can be perceived as a *community of practice* [CoP] (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). For Wenger, identity has to do with *modes of belonging*, how individuals perceive themselves as members or non-members of different communities. Individuals gradually learn how to act and what is important to know within the particular community of practice. Thus they move from the periphery to the core of membership. They develop modes of belonging within those communities of practice that they enter and the roles they identify with. They also bring their own knowledge and experience to the community and take part in producing the collective identity of that community.

Wenger uses the term 'social ecology of identity' to demonstrate how identity within a specific community of practice is constructed by different modes of belonging: engagement (what people do), imagination (what people think they can do) and alignment (how they situate themselves). Firstly, Wenger proposes that the process of *identification* is an essential element of our very being and determines how we understand and define or classify ourselves and how others define or classify us, in term of nationality, gender, age, occupation, attitudes, etc. Identification is an integral part of ourselves and can be both positive and negative, as it shapes both what we are and what we are not (Wenger 1998: 191). *Negotiability* is the second process that takes part in shaping our identities. This concept "refers to the ability, facility, and legitimacy to contribute to, take responsibility for, and shape the meanings that matter within a social configuration" (Wenger 1998: 197). Levels of negotiability determine whether the individual is located outside the community, at the periphery, or at the core. This is particularly in-

teresting with regard to the placement of after-school centres in schools. In a sense, school and after-school centre can be seen as two separate communities of practices, that are intrinsically linked as they share members and locals to some extent. According to Wenger, human beings take part in a constellation of CoP's, and often individuals work as brokers as they mediate information and connect different practices (Wenger 1998).

CoP's are created and sustained through shared meanings, stories and tools. For Wenger, involvement in negotiating shared meanings is reflected in both participation and non-participation. Participation is an active process "which is both personal and social. It is a complex process which combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling and belonging. It involves our whole person, including our bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations" (Wenger 1998: 56). Participation always involves mutual recognition, as "participants shape each other's experiences of meaning" (ibid). This process does not intrinsically entail mutual respect or equality, only that individuals engage in a process of negotiation. The concepts of *participation* and *non-participation* are vital to understanding how individuals adapt and are accepted (or not) into a community of practice. This is because "[w]e not only produce our identities through the practices we engage in, but we also define ourselves through practices we do not engage in" (Wenger 1998: 164). Non-participation is an integral part of our lives, as we cannot possibly identify with every possible social context we come across in our lives. Moreover, non-participation in some areas allows for participation in other areas: in this sense, non-participation is not necessarily a negative term. People care about things that are within their range of negotiability and their

desire to participate diminishes if they do not have a voice (Wenger 1998). Thus, the social ecology of identity provides a useful framework to analyse the professional identity of recreation personnel and create practical knowledge on how they perceive their professional role within the educational system.

## Methods

The present study on the professional identity of recreation personnel was part of a larger research on the organisational identity of after-school centres (Pálsdóttir 2012). The overall research was a qualitative multi-case study of two after-school centres for 6–9 year old children in Reykjavik. The after-school centres were located on school sites, but were operated by the city's sport and recreation department. The after-school centres were chosen specifically because their leaders were experienced and recognized as strong leaders who had managed to build up a good work place-ethics and provide good care to children.

**Participants.** The participants in this part of the study were the leaders of two after-school centres and seven recreation personnel. The majority of the recreation personnel were people in their twenties, with no tertiary education. Pseudonyms were used to enable the participants to talk freely about their work and workplace, and some information altered to ensure anonymity.

**Interviews.** Human beings share experiences and histories of learning and meaning through conversation: by talking, listening, exchanging opinions, and even arguing (Wenger 1998). In the present case study, a semi-structured interview was an important tool for gathering information on how different stakeholders described their involve-

ment in the after-school centre and their views on the practice and organisational framework (Stake 2005). The participants were asked about their daily work, activities, collaboration, and asked to discuss both the challenges and advantages to be found in their work. Each interview lasted from 30–60 minutes. In all, 14 interviews were recorded and transcribed.

**Observations.** Observations were used to collect background data both before and after the interviews, to enable the researcher to connect to the stories and descriptions given in interviews. Fieldwork is “... the form of inquiry in which one is immersed personally in the ongoing social activities of some individual or a group for the purpose of research” (Wolcott 1995: 66). In Wenger’s terms, in entering the field, the researcher becomes an “unconventional” member of the communities of practices (Wenger 1998: xv). In this study, the researcher made approximately twenty visits to the centres over an 18 month period. These visits made it possible to create an informal relationship with the personnel and to observe their work first hand.

**Data analysis.** Wenger’s concept of the social ecology of identity was used to analyse how the personnel conceived their roles within the after-school centres but also to identify their ‘sources of belonging’. It was important to examine how personnel took part (or not) in creating the institutional setting and the level at which they engaged in, and identified with, the activities in the after-school centre. Non-participation is reflected in experiences of not being heard, of individuals or groups being marginalised, and in not having access to the validation of meaning. Furthermore, it was essential to be able to identify what constituted modes

of belonging. Therefore, the study analysed how participants engaged in the practices of the after-school centres, how they interpreted their participation, and where they situated themselves subjectively within these practices.

## Findings

The main findings of this study indicate that the professional identity of recreation personnel was shaped by various sources of both participation and non-participation. The importance of leadership and the work of the leaders in each centre was crucial and a determining factor in creating a community of practice. Although the service was placed in schools, the personnel did not perceive themselves as active members in the educational sector. The first section introduces the different roles of leaders and recreation personnel, and the daily assignments they undertook. In the following sections, the main themes that analysis of data produced, are presented.

### Engagement of leaders and recreation personnel

The leaders were responsible for taking key-decisions in regard to the agenda and organisation of the work within the centres. Anna and Helen showed a strong commitment to the work of the after-school centres, and visualized themselves working in this setting for a long time. Their commitment to their work, in fact, seemed to be much higher than that of the other personnel. They were the persons holding everything together, visiting almost every station in the after-school centre daily, making sure staff was informed of practical matters and that everything was going well. As they were the only staff members having regular meetings with school they provided inform-

ation about students and school schedule (if necessary) to the staff, acting as brokers in Wenger's sense of the word.

However, decision-making was generally not done in a top-down manner. Anna and Helen both emphasized that decision-making was collaborative, and they encouraged peer-support within the group. In staff meetings, the leaders would direct the discourse by asking questions: How can we control the noise in this area? What can we do to make transitions go faster so children don't have to wait before activities start? They would promote discussions about how to cope with various problems that arose, such as behavioural issues or support for individual children. They would encourage the personnel to work together to find solutions to the practices of the centre. In talking about staff, the majority of whom were university students and had limited experience working with children, Anna said:

This is in fact only their extra job. They are students, and that is number one. They are here and they do well, but you can also sense that sometimes they are lacking in passion. But maybe you should not expect too much, I don't know. And I think that if we were to get more educational programs, and they were to receive education in child development [they would be more interested], because these kids do not generally have children. So there is a lot for them to learn, and many things make them insecure. Therefore it would be extremely useful if they would get more guidance. But as I say, this is a very good group that I have, and they are extremely kind to the children.

There is an ambiguity in Anna's words. On the one hand, she said that the personnel

needed more training and education; on the other hand, she maintained that she had a "very good group". Anna acknowledged that her personnel considered the job secondary to their university studies and that most of them did not have experience of child rearing and needed guidance to develop their practices in this area. But she strives hard to make the best out of the lack of educated and experienced workers. Instead, Anna emphasizes that being friendly and able to connect to the children is a valuable quality which she found in many of her current personnel. Providing support to personnel was an essential part of the work of the leaders and took considerable time from other projects. Helen explained how she interviewed each staff member in the fall, and that she talked regularly about their practice with children and ways to improve their skills.

The majority of the other recreation personnel said that working in the after-school centre was convenient for the time being but that they had other aspirations for their future careers, thus confirming Anna's words above. The personnel had a variety of roles in the after-school centres, including that of ensuring that the children felt cared for and were safe. The personnel took part in various activities, such as collecting children from the school and bringing them to the after-school centre, doing outdoor supervision, helping out in the canteen, and overseeing various play-areas. They also undertook more specific work, for example, organizing group-work that would continue over a period of a few weeks, working with children in arts and crafts projects, going on fieldtrips, directing plays in which children took part, and preparing exhibitions with the children for parents to view. In both centres, the daily schedule consisted of a mixture of free play and group work with children. During opening hours between 1:30 pm to 5:15

pm the after-school centres were buzzing with activity, and the personnel were preoccupied with the children.

**Preparation.** The personnel had about 30 minutes of preparation time each day. This time was not very formal, with staff member showing up at different times, sometimes bringing their own lunch with them. Preparation time was used in various ways, such as in discussions about the activities to be offered to the children, getting resources for group work, and prepare the afternoon refreshment. On a normal day, there was little time for personnel to consult with each other or to prepare activities. Staff meetings, held every other week in both centres after opening hours, were opportunities to discuss various practicalities. Each member of staff was responsible for overseeing specific play area(s), and the general division of work had sometimes been planned one week ahead. However, often the arrangement of the work was decided in the few minutes before the children arrived.

**Play time.** The majority of the time in both after-school centres was play time, which was a time that the children would have for free play. A variety of play areas had been set up in both centres, such as areas for Lego construction, role-playing, and drawing. The children from both centres could use the outdoor area daily, even on snowy and rainy days. The role of personnel seemed to be to observe rather than engage in the play activities of children, unless the children needed assistance.

**Group work.** In both after-school centres, the personnel organised group-work, so called 'clubs'. They invited children in grades 2-4 to participate in a variety of activities, each with a specific focus and and

individual adult group leader. The children signed up to these groups, although they were not obligated to do so.

However, organizing and maintaining the group-work could be challenging. During the fall of 2009, no specific clubs were running in one of the centres, because the majority of the personnel were new, and it took time for the leader to train the personnel to be able to take on added responsibilities.

**Flexibility.** Personnel had considerable freedom to decide what they wanted to do with the children, as shown by Sólveig's words:

You have a lot of freedom. If you are interested in something then you can use that with the children, like, there is one singer here, and she has a choir, and there are art clubs, and sometimes I offer dance, because I am taking dancing lessons. You have a lot of freedom in the work. This I find a huge benefit.

Their level of negotiability was relatively high with regard to influencing their daily work. Most of the personnel interviewed said that the flexibility in the work and positive atmosphere were among the things that they valued and that motivated them to keep working in the after-school centre. The flexibility at work allowed them to engage in activities *on their own terms*. The fact that the personnel could easily take part in deciding in which activities to participate enhanced their sense of belonging, fostered a sense of participation and being a valued member of the community.

However, some personnel assumed more responsibility than others. Christie had a masters degree in fine arts. She had responsibilities in the arts and crafts area and guided both children and other person-



nel when working with paints and various other media. On a regular basis, the centre held exhibitions of the artwork which the children produced in the after-school centre. Christie was in charge of the overall preparation. She worked independently on organizing these projects, deciding which materials to use and how to explore the creative process with the children. She involved the other recreation personnel who were working with the children in the arts and crafts area. From time to time, she would tell Anna what resources were needed, and Anna would purchase paint and obtain other necessary materials.

*On rainy days the room could get crowded, with children playing and chatting in every corner.*

As the majority of the personnel had not made long-term commitments, they did not spend much time in reflection. They were not very critical about their work but enjoyed the relaxed and playful atmosphere. In many ways the personnel did not have to assume responsibility for the work provided in the after-school centre. Instead, the majority of them simply felt that the leaders knew best, and preferred to follow directives rather than initiate activities: "Helen is on top of things, so she has worked out the framework, and you kind of just fit into it, so it is very, very simple." The general 'laissez-faire' attitude of the recreation personnel and their lack of involvement in the organisation of their work stems from the fact that they do not perceive themselves as full-members of the community. They did not identify themselves as *professionals* but as part-time personnel under the supervision and guidance of more experienced workers, such as the leaders, Anna and Helen.

### **Aiming for care, social learning and leisure**

The personnel seemed to share an affinity to provide care to the children, and they identified with the policy emphasis to provide children with opportunities to take part in leisure activities and play. Both centres had a playful atmosphere and many staff members talked about that work was fun. Firstly, all of the participants found it important to *create a safe and caring* environment. The concept of care was twofold: (a) physical care and (b) care for the emotional well-being of children. Firstly, the personnel said that it was important to provide physical security and physical well-being. Veiga underlined the issues of security and physical safety of the children in her statement:

It is our job to take care of them while their parents work. We have to make sure that all children have arrived, register them when they come, and if somebody is missing we have to find him or her. We observe the children throughout the day and guide them, making sure that they are secure.

The role of the personnel, from the physical care perspective, is first and foremost to supervise the children and to intervene only when there is the possibility of harm. However, the personnel perceived that one of their roles was to care for the emotional well-being of children, not only to provide physical security. Margrét said that she considered it important to "create a home away from home" for the children. In her view it was important that:

The children feel warmth and feel that they are coming to a place which is fun and welcoming, that they can trust the people that work here and know what they can and cannot do. [...] I don't want

this to be just a “storage” but rather like a home, where they come and feel good, they are fed, and get the help they need. You know, that this is like mom and dad, without being mom and dad, or as close to it as possible.

However, there were several obstacles in the provision of care, amongst those were the lack of facilities, the workload and, sometimes, inexperience. For example, the facility for the 30 robust and energetic 1st graders that started in 2008 in one of the after-school centres was a medium-sized classroom which during school hours would accommodate 18–22 students. On most days, a number of children would choose outdoor activities, and the hallway was also used as a play-area. On rainy days the room could get crowded, with children playing and chatting in every corner. Under such circumstances, it could be difficult to get peace and quiet; consequently, if a child was tired or not feeling well there was in fact no place to go. Thus, providing the effective care to which many of the personnel aspired could be challenging, and the setting was in many cases nothing like home.

Secondly, the majority of the recreation personnel interviewed expressed the view that the after-school centre should *enhance children’s social learning*. There were differences in the descriptions given by the personnel of the social learning, as some had more extensive ideas than others. However, everyone emphasized the importance of the peer-group. They considered it important that every child was connected with the group and not excluded from activities. There was a fundamental view that children were active participants in the practice. Sólveig said that the children “develop their social capabilities by being around their peers and, yes, interacting with them.” Cu-

riously, the personnel did not make connections between the activities of the children during the school-day and their activities during after-school hours. In this sense, the pedagogy of the recreation personnel with regard to the enhancing social learning was limited and focused on creating a setting in the after-school hours for social activities. By and large, the recreation personnel did not intervene in the social activities of the children during the play-time unless there was a specific need, which exemplifies the importance of the peer-group. The organised group-work was sporadic and, sometimes, there was a lack of continuity as there was a high turnover of personnel, and the membership of the group of children changed.

The third major understanding that the personnel had of their role related to the informal character of the activities in the after-school centre; that they should be *leisure activities* rather than organized learning activities. Thus, the recreation personnel emphasized the *informal* character of the social learning that took place in the after-school centres in contrast with the *formal* learning of the schools. They made a clear distinction between their work in the after-school centres and teachers work in the schools: “We do not teach in the after-school centres. We do not want this to be an extended school day”, Heiða said. For those reasons, the majority of the activities in the after-school centre were not obligatory for the children, but optional. “This is their free-time and it is important that they experience a certain amount of freedom and that they have a choice of activities, but not that they simply can do whatever they want.” Although it may be controversial to define the time children spend in the after-school centre as their ‘free-time’ – since they are placed in this setting by their parents and their activ-

ities are constrained by the framework the recreation personnel in both centres regularly stated that the after-school centre was different from the school because it operated in the children's 'free-time'. The informal character of the learning in the after-school centres was also reflected in the way the recreation personnel generally situated themselves in the background, rather than in the foreground of the various activities.

### **Marginalisation**

In many ways, the recreation personnel felt marginalised and powerless with regard to their location in the educational sector. Their general feeling was that their work was often seen by school staff as not belonging in the school. Their use of facilities within the school depended on what was available as school operations took priority. Sometimes plans needed to be changed, even on short notice, to adapt to the needs of the school. School activities took priority over the daily program of the after-school centres, including sporadic events, such as when a school principal decided to use the school canteen for a staff meeting, or a teacher decided to have a play rehearsal in the canteen at the same time as the scheduled after-school centre afternoon snack. Monthly meetings between school principals and leaders of the after-school centres did not seem to prevent such conflicts from occurring.

Sólveig said, when asked about the cooperation with the school:

Sometimes if there is something going on in the school we are not informed until the time we show up. It is quite uncomfortable not to be informed with some notice, if there are changes. But, well... there is this facilities manager

who sometimes interferes with what we are doing. It can be annoying, like if we have something going and we have a group of children in the school. And he shows up and turns off the lights and says that the lights should be turned off at 16:00.

It seems as if the school authorities sometimes forgot that there was another form of practice going on in the school buildings. This forgetfulness is a part of the lack of recognition experienced by the personnel in the after-school centres. Being forgotten can be perceived as similar to being told that you are not important or that you do not count. As a result, the personnel did not feel that the school community at large showed any special interest in the work they were doing with the children, even though these same children were pupils in the school. The recreation personnel did not feel that they could influence or affect the organisational framework that had been set for the after-school centres, and thus they situated themselves as outsiders in the school.

Even though the two leaders had monthly meetings with school principals, information did not always appear through the right channels. Often they would get important information through parents about school activities, such as when certain classes were having a get-together with teachers and parents in after school-hours, or the class could be taking a field trip and returning back later than usual, impacting attendance at after-school care. It was obvious that the leaders felt that their expertise was not recognized or valued in their co-operation with the school. "We are attending to the same children", Helen said, "and we ought to share more information". Occasional consultations between recreation personnel and teachers or experts

from the school usually involved instructions or advice being given to the recreation personnel, not vice-versa.

It was a challenge for the personnel to define their (professional) roles within the school and within the educational system at large. They did not engage in the overall project of the educational system as they limited their participation mainly to the centres' daily activities. They also did not feel a need to cooperate with the teachers or the school in general. Their idea of what

teachers did in school was that teachers taught children to read and write, ignoring the fact the teachers do in fact work with children on both formal and informal activities throughout the school-day. The majority of the staff did not imagine that their input to childrens education made a big difference in the broader sense, beyond the hours children spent in the centre. The school community did not seem to recognize the importance of the practice within the after-school centre, or at least, school

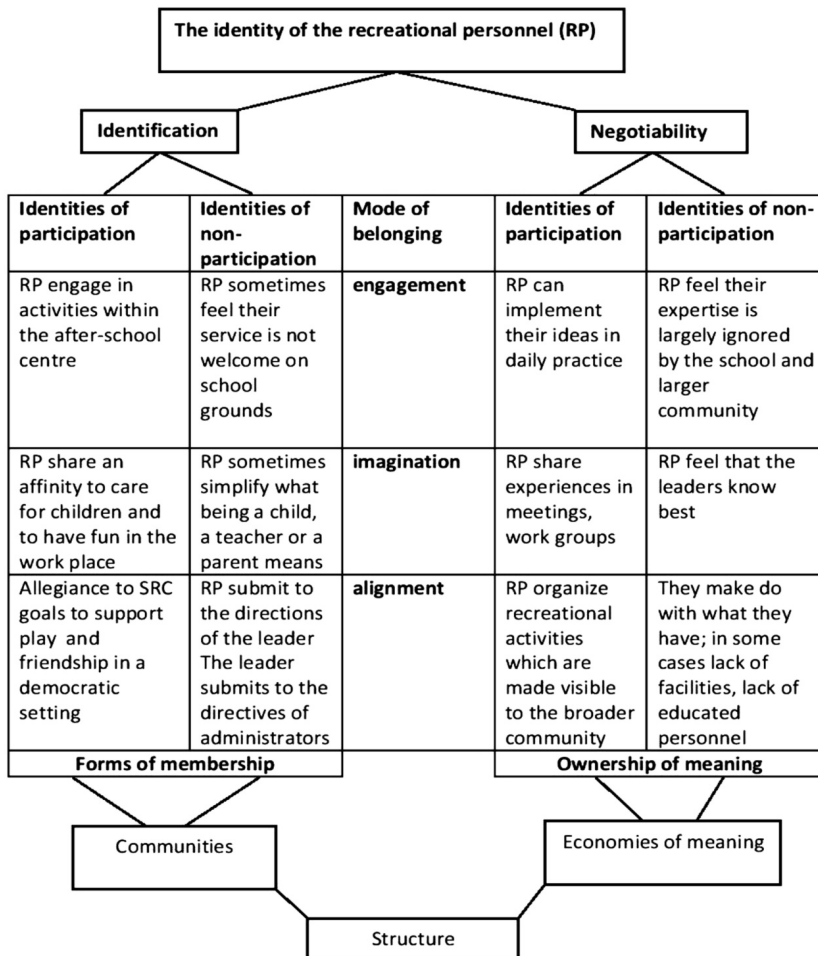


Figure 1. The identity of the recreation personnel within the after-school centre (model adapted from Wenger 1998).

activities had priority over any after-school activities. The findings show that the practice in the after-school centres had different purposes than school practices, and was related to care, social learning and leisure. Hence, recreation personnel was struggling to create a professional identity, and define their areas of participation and non-participation.

### **Identities of participation and non-participation**

Figure 1 presents an overview of the layers of identity of recreation personnel within their workplace, the after-school centre, in light of Wenger's theory of the social ecology of identity. The professional identity of the personnel is compounded by layers of participation as well as non-participation as they both engage actively on some levels as well submit to authority. Their backgrounds, previous experiences and social status affect how they engage in, and identify with their work. Whether they make a long-term commitment to the practice or are simply transient members for a short period of time, influences their level of membership and identification with the work. The examples of participation recorded above indicate a shared professional identity, as they engaged in activities as members and as owners of meaning within the after-school centre. However, the examples of lack of membership and ownership of meaning can be traced both to internal and external sources, which needs to be explored further. One important source of non-participation, evident above, is the marginalisation of their work within the school, as the personnel perceived that their work was not recognized as a part of the educational endeavour. However, in a sense they themselves did not recognize their own potential influence on the children's educational progress and wellbeing,

and therefore, did not connect their work with that of the school.

## **Conclusion**

The data presented here from Iceland show, that as their counterparts in other countries, recreation personnel are struggling to develop a professional identity within the educational sector (EFILWC 2006; Foss 2011; Haglund 2004). The findings of this study show that it is important to explore how personnel engage in creating a community of practice within the after-school centre. Although the after-school centres in Reykjavik seem to be primarily designed to *care* for children in the absence of parents, recreation personnel also aim to provide opportunities for *social learning* through informal *leisure activities*. These aims which are generally shared with recreation personnel in the Nordic countries explain the passive roles that recreation personnel seem to take when compared with school teachers (Stanek 2012; Ackesjö 2011). An alternative pedagogical approach is needed that sees recreation personnel as active participants and members of a shared educational practice within schools.

Wenger's model of the social ecology of identity helps us to understand why the majority of the recreation personnel had difficulties in assuming control over the task domain, even though it was left in their charge. Their membership in the educational endeavour was limited, both by the organisational design and by their own inner constraints. In many cases, they relied on the initiative of, and advice from, more experienced personnel, as well as from the leaders of the centres. The results indicate that part-time staff had difficulties in becoming full members in a professional practice, and that until more qualified staff

members are employed it will be difficult to establish a clearer professional identity of recreation personnel within the educational system. Furthermore, the more qualified personnel, such as the two leaders, played an extremely vital role and did everything in their power to counterbalance the lack of structure and input. Two years after data gathering, Helen returned to her former job as a teacher, whereas Anna is still working as leader.

The roles, values, and responsibilities of the recreation personnel were unclear. Although the recreation personnel in this study adopted the general view that social learning was the primary focus of the work in the after-school centres, few of them had articulated views on how they were supporting social learning. Nor did they connect their work with the lives of children during regular school-hours or in the pre-schools, as they felt that their work did not relate to that of the school. A comprehensive discourse about the professional underpin-

nings of this service for children is lacking, and this is not unique to the centres in Reykjavik. There are serious indications that the recreation pedagogy of after-school care for school-aged children in the Western hemisphere seems to be in a state of crisis, largely because of the dominance of academic or school-based discourses. The discourse is largely directed from within the school community, the source of authority from which validity of meaning seems to emanate (Cartmel 2007; Haglund 2004; Smith and Barker 2002). Even in Denmark and Sweden, where the professional training is most developed, research shows that recreation pedagogues feel pressured by teachers to work in accordance with the school culture and rules (Calander 2000, Haglund 2004; Højholt 2001; Stanek 2012). The location of this service in schools calls for a thorough exploration of the role of free play and leisure in the education of children within schools, and the roles of professionals who organize the services.

## References

- Ackesjö, H. 2011. Medspelare och ordningsvakter. Barns bilder av fritidspedagogens yrkesroller på fritidshemmet och i skolan [Collaborators and supervisors. The images of children of the roles of leisure-time pedagogues]. In A. Klerfelt and B. Haglund, Eds. *Fritidspedagogik. Fritidshemmet teorier och praktiker* [Recreation pedagogy. Theory and practice in the leisure-time centre] (pp. 182–203). Stockholm: Liber.
- Andersson, B. 2013. *Nya fritidspedagoger – I spänningsfältet mellan tradition och nya styrformer*. Institutionen för tillämpad utbildningsvetenskap, Umeå universitet. Umeå: Print & Media.
- Bennett, J. 2003. Starting strong. The persistent division between care and education. *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 1(1): 21–48.
- Calander, F. 2000. From “the Pedagogue of Recreation” to Teacher’s Assistant. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 44(2): 207–224.
- Cartmel, J. 2007. *Outside School Hours Care and Schools* [Doctoral thesis]. Retrieved from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/17810/>
- European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EFILWC). 2006. *Employment Developments in Childcare Services for School-age children*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. Retrieved from <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2006/32/en/1/ef0632en.pdf>

- Foss, V. 2011. Usynlige læringskulturer i skolefritidsordningen. Sammenhenger og brudd mellom barnehage, skolefritidsordning og skole [Invisible learning-community in the after-school centre. Connections and dis-connections between pre-school, after-school centre and school]. *Barn 2*: 27–45.
- Haglund, B. 2004. *Traditioner i möte. En kvalitativ studie av fritidspedagogers arbete med samlingar i skolan* [A meeting of traditions: Qualitative research on recreation-pedagogues work in schools] (Doctoral thesis). Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg.
- Højholt, C. 2001. *Samarbejde om børns udvikling. Deltagere i social praksis* [Cooperation on children's development. Participants in a social practice]. Copenhagen: Gyldendal Uddannelse.
- Højholt, C. 2004. *Professionalism – Across Conflicting Practices for the Development of Children*. Paper presented at the 3rd Nordic Conference on Cultural and Activity Research, September 3–5, 2004, Copenhagen, Denmark. Retrieved from [http://rucforsk.ruc.dk/site/files/34894404/Professionalism\\_-\\_across\\_conflicting\\_practices.pdf](http://rucforsk.ruc.dk/site/files/34894404/Professionalism_-_across_conflicting_practices.pdf)
- Lave, J. and Wenger, J. 1991. *Situated Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moss, P. 2006. Structures, understandings and discourses. Possibilities for re-envisioning the early childhood worker. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* (7)1: 30–41.
- Pálsdóttir, K. Þ. 2010. After-school centres for 6–9 year old children in Reykjavík, Iceland. In *Barn* 28(4): 9–28.
- Pálsdóttir, K. Þ. 2012. *Care, Learning and Leisure: The Organisational Identity of After-school Centres for Six-to nine-year Old Children in Reykjavík*. (Doctoral thesis. University of Iceland). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1946/16754>
- Petrie, P., Egharevba, I., Oliver C. and Poland, G. 2000. *After-school lives. After-school services*. London: The Stationery Office.
- Reykjavík. 2006. Starfsmannahandbók frístundaheimila. [Handbook for personnel in after-school centres]. Reykjavík: Íþróttta- og tómsundasvið.
- Reykjavík. 2010. Borgarráðssamþykkt um starfsemi og rekstur frístundaheimila Reykjavíkurborgar [City Council's agreement on the operation of after-school centres in Reykjavík]. Retrieved from [http://reykjavik.is/Portaldata/1/Resources/skjol/svid/itr/skjol/fristundaheimili/borgarr\\_\\_ssam\\_ykk\\_lok2010.pdf](http://reykjavik.is/Portaldata/1/Resources/skjol/svid/itr/skjol/fristundaheimili/borgarr__ssam_ykk_lok2010.pdf)
- Smith, F. and Barker, F. 2002. Out of school clubs at the boundary of home and school. In R. Edwards, Ed. *School's Out. Children, Home and School. Regulation, Autonomy or Connection?*: 57–74. London: Routledge and Falmer.
- Stake, R. 2005. Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, Eds. *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3.ed.): 446–465. London: Sage.
- Staneck, A. H. 2012. Pædagogers bidrag til skolen. In P. Hviid and C. Højholt. *Fritidspædagogik og børneliv*: 102–128. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Torstenson-Ed, T. and Johansson, I. 2000. *Fritidshemmet i forskning och förändring* [The after-school centre in research and transition]. Stockholm: Skolverket.
- Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wolcott, H. F. 1995. *The Art of Fieldwork*. London: Sage.
- Youth Act no. 70/2007.

Kolbrún Þ. Pálsdóttir, School of Education, University of Iceland, Stakkahlíð, IS-105 Reykjavík, Iceland  
E-mail: kolbrunp@hi.is