

Individual development plans as expressions of regulated childhood - equivalence with variation

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In Sweden individualization is highlighted in the 1998 curriculum for preschool and school, and individual development plans begin to appear on the municipal level in the late 1990s (as previously mentioned). Individual development plans, which are occasionally designed as "agreements-contracts" and signed by parents/carers, teachers and children, may be seen as the strictest kind of regulation on the individual level in the history of preschool/compulsory school. This is interesting, since we are talking about a deregulated school these days. Regulation seems to have changed in character, away from school towards individuals and from school regulation towards individual regulation and self-regulation. The phenomenon of individual development plans is spreading to various sectors and social spaces and tends to cover large parts of children's lives (*op.cit.*) as well as those of adults.

On 1 January 2006, individual development plans (IDPs) were made obligatory in the Swedish compulsory school in an addition to the Compulsory School Act (2005). This means that teachers in the compulsory school are responsible for establishing IDPs for all pupils in the compulsory school from year 1 to year 9 in connection with development talks. Teachers are to compile this document in a dialogue with the parent/carer and the pupil. The most important reasons for introducing these plans were to make it possible for a larger number of pupils to reach the national goals set up in the curricula and syllabi and for parents/carers to obtain an increased influence on the content of pupils' work at school.

According to the recommendations and directions of the Swedish National Agency for Education (2005), the individual development plans are to set up goals for what the pupils should achieve in the short-term as well as in the long-term perspective. They should also concretely describe what efforts should be made by the school, pupils and parents/carers in order for the pupils to be successful in their schoolwork.

Although preschool and preschool classes are not regulated by the additions to the Compulsory School Act, they have been setting up individual development plans on the basis of existing municipal and local initiatives since the late 1990s. In the last five years, the introduction of IDPs into preschool has increased from 10 to 48 percent of the Swedish municipalities. According to the Swedish National Agency of Education (2006-06-15), preschool is not to "establish individual development plans against the parents' wishes".

The aim of this article is to study individual development plans (IDPs) as an expression of a regulated childhood and institutional practice. An individual development plan is a phenomenon that has an impact on the individual's possibilities to act as a subject within the framework of societal structures, institutional practice and current ideologies. In previous articles we have studied individual development plans as a phenomenon of time, society and school with a focus on IDP templates that had not been completed. It is now essential to proceed to discussing the goals and content of individual development plans that have actually been completed and compiled. What content is chosen and constructed in individual development plans for children in preschool and preschool classes? What influence and responsibilities do children, parents/carers and teachers seem to have in compiling individual development plans? What attitudes to children, learning and assessment are expressed in the individual development plans? What expressions of children's possible identities and subject positions can be discerned? All these questions can be coordinated in a critical didactic perspective. In sum, children are studied as subjects in relation to content, form and assessment in the individual development plans.

Guiding question:

- What critical didactic signs can be discerned in individual development plans for younger children?

The IDP material was collected in October 2006 in three urban municipalities and one rural municipality in southern Sweden. The three urban municipalities comprised municipal areas that were ethnically relatively homogeneous and heterogeneous, respectively. The material consists of 82 randomly chosen plans for children in preschool and preschool classes.

Even though we are not dealing with exactly identical types of plans and documents, we can observe that there seems to be a transnational trend and a tendency towards similar standardized systems of documentation, contracts and tools for regulation on the individual level. In English-speaking countries the denomination *IEP*, or *Individual Educational Plans/Programmes*, is used. As we interpret it, this is mainly a counterpart of programs of measures, since it occurs in texts about special education. IDPs and programs of measures are frequently similar and, in many cases, identical documents under different headings. *Individual diary* is another concept used in British preschool activities. "A profile of each child and their progress is kept in their individual diary which is available at all times to the parent/carer". In Norway the concept of *ILP*, or *Individuelle Laereplaner* or *Individuelle opplæringsplaner*, is used. Like IEPs, they seem to have a background in special education. The Danish counterpart is called *individuelle laeseplaner*. The IDP movement in Sweden is characterized by "forward-regulating" plans as public documents for *all children* (as opposed to programs of measures for certain children only, or retrospective and summative assessment).

The concept of *regulation* may refer to "giving rules for", "arranging", "adjusting", "correcting". In our study, the concept of regulation is linked to the steering documents for preschool and school at different levels, with a focus on the individual level. Individual development plans can be seen as expressions of legal as well as ideological regulation. Sahlin-Andersson discusses the emergence of the auditing society with transnational regulation. She claims that the new steering system (decentralization, goal-related education and local leadership) has resulted in the emergence of a new kind of regulation focusing on auditing the achievements of local practice, which results in a great and increasing amount of documentation, evaluation and standardization. This new kind of regulation is characterized by being transnational rather than national, being linked to expertise rather than democracy and developing in networks rather than hierarchies. Moreover, it is voluntary rather than obligatory to a large extent, and the people who are regulated are often those who have requested the new regulation most eagerly. According to this researcher, the rules emerge in an interplay between the regulators and those who are regulated, and their implementation requires the active participation of the parties regulated. The characteristics of this transnational regulation can be related to our study, where different parties are to cooperate in establishing individual development plans, and where the initiative initially emerged on the municipal and local levels.

The analysis in the present study falls into three distinctive main categories, or normalities, that display varying types of regulation. The concept of *normality* refers to what is common as well as to what can be interpreted as being desirable in the individual development plans.

- *Normal children regulated by school subjects* – in relatively homogeneous areas in urban municipalities
- *Socially and monolingually regulated multicultural children* – in relatively heterogeneous areas in urban municipalities
- *Monocultural children primarily regulated by need* – in rural municipalities

We would like to underline that the individual development plans reveal a high degree of steering and standardized templates with different orientations as well as desirable self-regulation and a low degree of influence on the part of children and parents/carers. Overall, something of a multi-contextual regulation of childhood and institutional practice emerges. The children's subject formation seems to be a matter of equivalence with variations depending on where they happen to grow up. We ask ourselves in what ways these shifting normalities lay the foundations for limiting or expanding the possibilities of being active in society and whether this creates inequality or equality in the so-called "knowledge society"

Contrary to national directives that individual children's achievements should not be evaluated and assessed, assessment in the plans that are oriented towards school subjects tend to be linked to grades. Assessment in the plans oriented towards social training and primarily care-oriented plans, however, tends to be linked to personality and is sometimes on the verge of violating integrity.

The children's ombudsman (BO, 2007-10-12) emphasizes that the skills required from children and young people in our days must be highlighted and discussed. Since, according to the Children's Ombudsman, society is changing rapidly, it is placing increasing demands on everyone's ability to search and critically analyze information, take initiatives, question and present information orally as well as in written language. Our study of a number of individual development plans indicates that laying the foundations for certain of these abilities and skills is lacking to a large extent. We ask ourselves whether these extremely standardized documents contribute to the development of critically-creative citizens.

Key words: Children, childhood, preschool, preschool class, individual development plans, critical didactics