

Leisure organisations are willing and able.

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Introduction

In Norway the municipalities are required as a result of sociopolitical goals to make it possible for all those that so wish to be able to take part in culture and leisure activities. For some with a disability this may involve removing physical barriers such as stairs, while for others it is a matter of overcoming totally different challenges in order to manage to take part. In many contexts the municipalities can only achieve this through cooperation with relevant leisure organisations such as sports clubs, choirs, climbing clubs and so on.

In government documents in Norway the aid known as life assistant is emphasised as central for people who need support in order to have meaningful leisure. The comparable service in Denmark is ledsageordningen og støtte- og kontaktpersonordningen, and in Sweden kontaktperson, kontaktfamilj og ledsagerservice. In the Nordic countries we are finding that there is a growing focus on arranging things so that more people are able to participate in leisure activities they have chosen themselves.

In Norway the Directorate of Health wants to strengthen what is being done in the field of "Life Assistant, Culture and Leisure Participation" in the municipalities. Kristiansand Municipality and the service known as Supported Leisure are responsible for the project related to this field, in close cooperation with the Directorate of Health.

Children, young people and adults with disabilities have various prerequisites, desires, needs and dreams. The life assistant service is intended to make it possible to realise the ideal of an active and meaningful life together with others. For many people access to this service is decisive for their being able to take part in culture and leisure activities they themselves have chosen. The life assistant service can be divided into three main types of solution:

- Individual life assistant
- Participation in an activity group
- An individual opportunity in cooperation with a voluntary organisation.

Most of those who are granted a life assistant in compliance with the social services act or the child protection act will need one of these solutions. In some cases it may be necessary to combine the individual life assistant with participation in an activity group or a voluntary organisation (Sosial- og helsedirektoratet 2007).

The main challenge for Norwegian municipalities and urban districts involves ensuring that the person who is granted the life assistant has the chance to take part actively in developing the outcome. The resulting solution is to be based on the wishes and needs of the person in question. This development makes obvious the need for increased competence and the development of new tools. Supported Leisure (SL) is an example of such a method.

When social inclusion is the aim

This paper has as its starting point practical experience from ongoing development work linked to the use of the SL method. The method has been tried out and developed as a result of several projects from 1998 to the present involving different target groups needing municipal support. The method is an example of how a municipality can provide an individual solution in cooperation with a voluntary organisation.

In our society no one makes choices in absolute freedom. Most people make a choice based on what is usual and considered acceptable. The range of organisations in the local community, the cost of taking part in the activity and times for when the members meet are examples of various conditions that can, for many people, be decisive in their choice of activity. Ideals linked to the sociopolitical aim regarding the equal right to participation in leisure activities seem to build on integration theories that emphasise a shared-value community. When such great emphasis is placed on the right of the individual to take part in leisure activities, this has to do with the fact that not everyone in society has the same opportunities for the self-realisation of their desires, dreams and needs as other people. Some people always seem to be repressed and we must acknowledge that society is characterised in varying degrees by difference in interests. Supported leisure makes visible a work process in which a case worker in the municipality and a focal member of a chosen leisure organisation can cooperate and complement each other in order to achieve the goals defined by the individual in need of support in his or her process of inclusion (Midtsundstad 2005).

Voluntary organisations – a sphere with opportunities

We have many leisure organisations in Norway, and for many people participation in one or several of the activities these offer is important in order for them to experience a feeling of community, share interests with others and experience meaning in their lives. Nowadays taking part in a leisure activity is as natural for us as going to school or work. However, some people find such participation difficult. Therefore, for various reasons they need support so as to be able to experience active membership in an organisation of their choice where their social role is appreciated.

Participation in a leisure organisation has to do with so much more than singing, dancing, playing goalball, fishing, and so on. For some people it is a matter of spending several hours every day climbing, or taking a year off work to have the opportunity, for example, to practise their hobby of archery full time. For most people, on the other hand, the leisure activity is a meeting place where they come into contact with others who are interested in the same thing as they are, one or several

evenings a week. Participation in leisure organisations creates secondary effects for people.

Experience shows that through taking part in ordinary leisure organisations, the individual gains access to other possibilities. For some people this can mean friendship, a close personal relationship or the offer of work. Our practical experience indicates that inclusion processes for people in need of support from a municipality can contribute to a change in their self-perception.

Cooperation is important

If a municipality wants to be successful in supporting children, young people, adults and elderly in their inclusion processes concerning leisure, this requires a flexibility that enables cooperation on the terms of the leisure organisations. The case worker in the municipality is a link between the person applying for support and the organisation in question. When there is salsa in one of the town's places of entertainment organised by a dancing club on a Sunday evening, or a rowing club has training for young people on a particular day in the week, these are times that have to be accepted. For many of the central members in leisure organisations it also suits best to receive telephone calls and have meetings outside their working hours. When we take such points into consideration, we also demonstrate the desire to cooperate on their terms.

For those who are granted a life assistant, it will almost always be necessary with follow-up that involves more than advice and guidance. No two inclusion processes are alike, and it is important to approach each one in such a way that solutions connected to the inclusion process can be tailor-made for the individual's needs, wishes and perhaps dreams. Before a person begins to take part in a leisure activity he or she has chosen, it is up to the case worker to ensure in the best possible way that all the requirements are met. In practice this means case workers are needed with the competence to supervise such inclusion processes based on knowledge concerning the leisure organisation in question.

Where shall we meet?

Most municipalities emphasise using financial resources with care. Furthermore, it is often easier for a case worker to use his or her office or a conference room in the municipal offices for meetings. However, this is a choice that should be carefully considered. A café can be a more neutral venue than the municipal office. Indeed, we should give the individual participant greater opportunity to decide where to meet. Some will want the meeting to take place at home, while others will prefer to meet the case worker in his or her office. Through development work related to the SL method our experience shows that many good meetings have taken place over a cup of coffee or a simple lunch in a café. In some cases we have experienced that this is the first time the person has been invited out to eat. Somewhere like this offers a totally different opportunity for a conversation.

Participation – a huge sphere of opportunity

In the work related to the SL method the concept of self-perception has been given focal significance. William James laid the foundation for later theories about, and research into, self-perceptions. He emphasised that we as human beings need to be seen and to be of consequence. Herman Blumer was the first to present a perspective that can be used as a starting point for an analysis of the social reality. By using the concept of symbolic interactionism he describes this as a perspective and a method (Blumer 1986). The cornerstones of symbolic interactionism can be described as follows:

- Definition of the situation
 - That all interaction is social
 - That we interact by means of symbols
 - That the human being is active
 - That we act, behave and exist in the present
- (Levin and Trost 1996:13).

Our self-perception includes an understanding of our capacities, the roles we have and the possibility of self-appreciation. Such self-acceptance means that we have the opportunity to accept ourselves as we are. Through meeting new experiences gained as a result of taking part in a leisure activity, we can change our evaluation of ourselves. Participation in a leisure activity always leads to an interaction between people that can create the opportunity for such a change.

In this connection Eva can be used as an example. She was given the chance to develop her interest in dance at a dance club. This gave her new roles. In the new environment Eva was not seen as someone mentally ill but as a line dancer. She could present herself in a new way. This resulted in a change in her self-perception that she herself feels has been significant for her now being back at work.

If people see themselves as unwelcome in various leisure activities, they will be influenced by this when meeting the people in such spheres (Midtsundstad 2003). Our understanding of reality not only becomes our reality but will also be decisive for our behaviour (Levin and Trost 1996:13). Many people with a disability are in danger of losing, or have lost, touch with people in such spheres as school, work and leisure activities. On the one hand there are people who, for example, seek out other people who are seen by the individual to belong to “the same category”. This will be a process that happens just as much unconsciously as consciously. In this connection Blumer and Mead’s concept of applied reflexivity can provide us with insight into the individual’s experience of the situation. The focal point here is our understanding that the human being thinks through his actions and evaluates them. However, the evaluations will be dependent on the individual’s own self-perception. As long as the individual is guaranteed good options, this is not a problem.

Current practice in many Norwegian municipalities and urban districts is not characterised by the offer of freedom of choice since the individual is not offered follow-up in leisure activities he or she has chosen. If we compare young people between 13-19 years of age with and without a disability in Norway, it is in fact the case that young people with a disability represent a greater share of membership of an organisation than those who are not disabled (National Documentation Centre

2008). We must be able to expect that people with a disability and drug addicts in rehabilitation do not stand out from other people. Increased government attention is therefore of great significance so as to ensure that individuals receive the chance to take part in groups and organisations.

For many who are granted a life assistant the social life linked to the leisure activity is unfamiliar. The lack of knowledge about how to behave as a participant in the self-chosen activity can be supplied by an organiser from the organisation. The case worker in the municipality has a responsibility to map out, for example, needs concerning this point with the person granted a life a life assistant, and provide support in the process up to starting a selected activity. For many people this means the need for thorough information and follow-up where the aim is to provide knowledge about how people are expected to behave in the sphere in question. Furthermore, organisers who belong to a leisure organisation could experience the need for guidance during this process.

Understanding symbols is also of significance in the process of inclusion. These are important codes that provide common meaning for the surroundings. We need such knowledge in order to understand and to feel a sense of belonging. Blumer emphasises the fact that through social interaction we can understand social gatherings and processes (Blumer 1986). We live our lives in a world that is social in its organisation. Symbols and objects help us learn to perform a number of tasks.

In the practical work linked to the SL method we see that the task of helping the individual to obtain knowledge of the common meaning in the symbols is important. Using organisers who belong to the organisation in question is in our experience the best way for individuals to obtain such help. Many need help to be able to define the meaning of the symbols in their context. In no matter what leisure activity many words will be used relating to the activity itself which it is important to understand. Our awareness and self-perception are gained through communication with other people. Words are the most common symbols we have to relate to. Our identity consists of both social definitions and individual, unique definitions. In line with this we can see that the person and society cannot be separated from each other since they are mutually dependent on each other. Everyone who begins a new activity has to learn or in some way get to know the activity's various symbols. This understanding plays an important role in binding the person and society together. It can be a matter of choice of clothes, gestures, movements, choice of expression and things that have meaning beyond themselves.

A view of humanity that stresses that all people are variable allows an interpretation of each other as active social beings who define situations in a different way. We have to understand the individual's situation. This is ensured in the work linked to the SL method through, among other things, mapping. Many people with a disability are invisible for us others, which consequently does not give them the opportunity to behave in the way expected of them as our fellow citizens. The result of this is that some live up to the expectation of being "different". This can lead to low participation in the social life of the community. School, the workplace, organised leisure activities, the person's circle of friends and suchlike are communities where people can have ordinary roles and establish social connections. In a symbolic interactional perspective it is not a question of people having given characteristics. In this

perspective it is a matter of behaviour in given situations. People are seen as active creators in processes and are therefore not predictable (Levin and Trost 1996:163). Thomas and Thomas underline this creative capacity in the following quote: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (1928:572).

Nothing can be taken for granted for more than just at that moment. Symbolic interactionism includes an understanding based on the human being not forgetting anything. Earlier experiences are also integrated in new experiences and evaluations. Granfelt points to the significance of the fact that subjective "dreams about reality" are important in the development of user-oriented social work. In her opinion this offers the best support for getting over personal hindrances that can give individuals a placement involving the risk of marginalisation (Granfelt 2003). We have to try continually to appreciate the individual's situation and build out from what in fact is the individual's starting point.

As people we are in the present all the time. Focusing on the present means that the way the person behaves now is not only dependent on our upbringing and previous experiences. Our socialisation and our experiences can therefore not be said to be the reason why we behave as we do. To a greater extent it has to do with the fact that we use our experiences when we act in the present. Symbolic interactionism, by means of this analysis, provides a positive view of the possibility for the individual to have his self-perception altered in the light of perspectives linked to relational circumstances.

An example of the use of Supported Leisure – step by step

Arne was a 12-year-old boy who lived with his father. They both had a limited social network

Arne had no children of his own age to go around with. At school there was a lot of unrest and problems and Arne had also started to cause trouble at home. Because of this background the case worker got in touch with Arne's father and arranged to meet.

1. A non-binding information meeting

At the first meeting the case worker got the chance to explain briefly what the method entails. Arne thought this sounded fine and wanted some help to find a leisure activity that he could take part in. This led to the next step that deals with mapping what the individual wants to do in his leisure time.

2. Desires, needs, assumptions and dreams

Arne thought it was difficult to talk about something he could think of doing. He was more preoccupied with explaining that playing football was no fun and that he did not want to join the scouts. Through the process of mapping Arne also got the chance along with his father to talk about how having ADHD could be difficult. Arne himself was able to say that it was not always easy to understand messages, for example.

Through mapping the case worker is given a chance to get to know the individual better. In Arne's case it was natural to ask questions about school, friends, family, what he liked doing, what he had done before, whether there were any leisure activities he could imagine taking part in and so on.

Arne explained that he had not been involved in any leisure activity before. But he had played football at school, though that was boring. He and his father also knew very little about what activities there were available apart from ball games such as handball and football, scouts and what was on offer at the municipal youth club.

The case worker gave Arne an activity brochure containing pictograms of different leisure activities. Arne looked through the brochure and pointed to the picture showing bowling. He said that he had once gone bowling with his father, and he thought that was fun. He also found pictures of archery and pistol shooting. The case worker concluded the conversation by asking what he should then find out about before their next meeting. Arne wanted to get to know more about whether he could go bowling.

3. Mapping the content of relevant leisure activities

In the town where Arne lives there are two bowling clubs that had groups for Arne's age. The case worker contacted both clubs and said why he was phoning by explaining briefly about SL. One club knew about SL from a previous case of inclusion and they thought it had gone so well that they were willing to take more people. The other club was perhaps not quite so positive. They said, among other things, that they only had one trainer and did not think they could give any extra follow-up to an individual participant. The case worker also found out when both clubs had training, how many took part, what the activity cost and so on.

4. Choice of activity

The case worker told Arne about the clubs and what they had said. Arne thought that the club that was nearest to where they live sounded the most interesting. While the case worker was at Arne's, he rang that club and talked to a trainer who invited them to come to the next training session to try it out.

5. Finding an organiser

The organiser is a person involved in the leisure activity who can be a contact person for the participant. Right from the case worker's first contact with a group or a voluntary organisation

he thinks about having to find someone who can be the person mainly responsible for this participant.

When the case worker has found an organiser then a meeting is arranged at which the participant and the organiser can meet and get to know each other.

6. Inclusion and evaluation

The aim is for the participant to become included and for the case worker to become superfluous. Throughout the process it is important to evaluate the arrangement at regular intervals and for the case worker to follow up the organiser and the participant during the inclusion period.

Sometimes things do not go quite as planned, as in Arne's inclusion process. After a few weeks the father got in touch with the case worker to say that Arne did not want to go to the bowling. The reason was teasing by another boy in the club who also went to the same school as Arne.

The case worker contacted the club and the trainer said that he had seen what was happening and that he had therefore put the two boys in different lanes, preferably with at least one other lane in between. It was his experience that Arne was just as likely to start the quarrelling. The case worker arranged a meeting with Arne, his father and the organiser. After some discussion Arne agreed to try a little longer. Then the father was to be there as an extra trainer, while the trainers were to keep a very close eye on how things went.

At the same time Arne and the case worker began to consider other activities, the result of which was archery. Arne left the bowling club and after taking the safety course archery requires he began to train there. He thought that was great fun, in addition to finding new friends there. This activity was positive not only for Arne but also for his father who after a short while became actively involved in the support apparatus.

When, for various reasons, some participants decide not to continue with an activity, it does not mean that we we have failed. What happens is a part of the process of finding a suitable activity for the participant. No matter what happens and what the result is, it is important to give the participant the feeling of having managed something and done something that is good.

Future challenges

The use of life assistants is an area of national priority in Norway. Bergh has been a central player in bringing to people's attention the significance of trying new methods. As early as 2000 he emphasised the importance of extended cooperation with voluntary organisations (Bergh). The SL method, which this paper deals with, can function as an example of how this can be done in a way that ensures individual solutions. It is also important that case workers who are to work within this field are given the competence and good working conditions in order to perform the task of achieving the best possible arrangement for participants.

By means of this paper we have tried to draw attention to the perspective of opportunity participation in leisure organisations can give people who are disabled. To exploit this there must be a cooperation established between the public and the private arenas. The SL method in this context is an example of a systematic approach used by Norwegian municipalities. More information about the SL method can be found at www.fritidmedbistand.no.

We would also like to draw your attention to the national website www.fritidforalle.no which among other things draws attention to other methods and local solutions related to "Life assistant, culture and leisure participation".

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