

Achievement Liberating Pedagogy as a Response to Declining Wellbeing

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to articulate the contours of an achievement liberating pedagogy as a response to a general decrease in wellbeing among children and young people in Denmark. The analysis is based on a research project conducted in leisure time centers and youth clubs. The decrease in wellbeing is complex but nevertheless calls for pedagogical and institutional action. We argue that the achievement society can be seen as one explanation of the decrease in wellbeing. We propose that an achievement liberating pedagogy can be a pedagogical response to the negative consequences of an achievement society. Achievement liberating pedagogy is a world-centered pedagogy based on practices that unfold in both structured and spontaneous activities. It involves a pedagogical intention of liberation from instrumental and result-oriented activities, from individual measurements and from self-optimization. Instead, it aims to direct the pedagogical telos away from individual achievement, towards communities and joint activities engaged in for their own sake. Based on empirical findings, we draw the contours of achievement liberating pedagogy, its pitfalls and conditions that can challenge it. The analysis is based on theoretical inspiration from Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance and Max Van Manen's analysis of pedagogical tact.

Keywords: wellbeing, achievement society, achievement subject, achievement liberating pedagogy, leisure time pedagogy, professional claims

Introduction and Research Questions

In the last decades, reports and research within the Scandinavian and European countries have drawn attention to a decrease in wellbeing among groups of children and especially young people (Bakken, 2018; Collishaw, 2015; Jensen et al., 2022; Jeppesen et al., 2020; Ottesen et al., 2018; Ottesen et al., 2022). Both within Scandinavian countries and other Western countries, stress, anxiety and loneliness among children and youth have increased over the past decades (Bakken, 2018; Collishaw, 2015; Krogh, 2023). In Denmark, a report on mental health and illness concludes that 15 % of all children and young people have been diagnosed with a mental disorder before the age of 18 (Jeppesen, et al., 2020, p. 15). Another report indicates that 40% of girls and 20% of boys aged 19 report that they have experienced a mental disorder at some point in their lives (Ottesen et al., 2022). Presumably, not all these diagnoses have been clinically established by a physician. Nevertheless, these statistics indicate that children and young people themselves have become increasingly aware of their own mental challenges.

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The decrease is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes and explanations. A large part of these explanations focuses on the individual, offering psychological perspectives and individualized interventions (Katznelson, Pless & Görlich, 2022). A potential risk of this individualization is that both societal factors and pedagogical institutions are overlooked as possible explanations and places to intervene (Petersen, 2016, Petersen & Krogh, 2021; Ringskou, Brinkmann, Matthiesen & Szulevicz, 2024).

We take our starting point in an analysis of the achievement society (Eckersley, 2011; Madsen, 2018; Petersen 2016; Petersen & Krogh, 2021; Starley, 2019), which is characterized by a strong focus on measurement, tests and individual achievement. These societal and political trends are, for instance, manifested in education policy and the education system where tests, grades and measurement today play a dominating role (Biesta, 2021; Jacobsen, 2024). In the achievement society, the individual needs to monitor oneself constantly and work on self-optimization in order not to fall behind the competition for achievement. The achievement society thus results in social norms and demands connected to achievement that place a burden on the individual (Petersen, 2016). If achievement is equated with constantly performing, improving and optimizing oneself it can lead to exhaustion and inhibit wellbeing (Katznelson, Pless & Görlich, 2022; Petersen & Krogh, 2021; Ringskou, Brinkmann, Matthiesen & Szulevicz, 2024; Ringskou, Matthiesen, Brinkmann & Szulevicz, 2024).

We propose an achievement liberating pedagogy as a pedagogical response to the decrease in wellbeing. We define achievement liberating pedagogy as a world-centered pedagogy (Biesta, 2021). This is a pedagogy which is based on a pedagogical intention of liberation from instrumental, pre-defined, result-oriented activities and from self-optimization and individual measurements. Instead, the pedagogical telos is directed away from individual achievements and towards joint activities where the activities themselves have meaning and purpose, thereby stressing communities and togetherness. Achievement liberating pedagogy is not a fixed method but a dynamic and context-sensitive approach that requires professional judgment, improvisation, and ethical attentiveness.

The ambition has been to examine, define and discuss possible practices of achievement liberating pedagogy through a research project within the Danish field of leisure time pedagogy. In Denmark, leisure time pedagogy spans from leisure time centers (in Danish called *SkoleFritidsOrdning/SFO* and *Fritidshjem*) for children aged 6–10 years, youth clubs for children and young people aged 10–18+ years. The professionals working in leisure time centers are called “pedagogues” stressing the broad pedagogical character of their work (rather than a narrow learning-agenda typically associated with “teachers”). The leisure time pedagogues working in leisure time centers have been a part of the Danish public school since the 1980’s, working across leisure time centers and lower primary school (children aged 6–10 years). In the first four grades where the children are 6–10 years old, they need adult supervision while their parents work and therefore participation in leisure time center is necessary. Participation in Leisure time clubs becomes more optional as they get older and need less adult supervision.

Although these two types of institution differ from each other when it comes to both the age of the children and their organization and not least connection to the Danish public school, they are often based on the same core values of Danish leisure time pedagogy. Historically, both forms of institutions have been formulated as an alternative, and at times in opposition, to the formal school system with its strong focus on structure and curricular (Ankerstjerne, 2010; Gravesen & Ringskou, 2018; Ringskou, 2021). Furthermore, the preventive work with